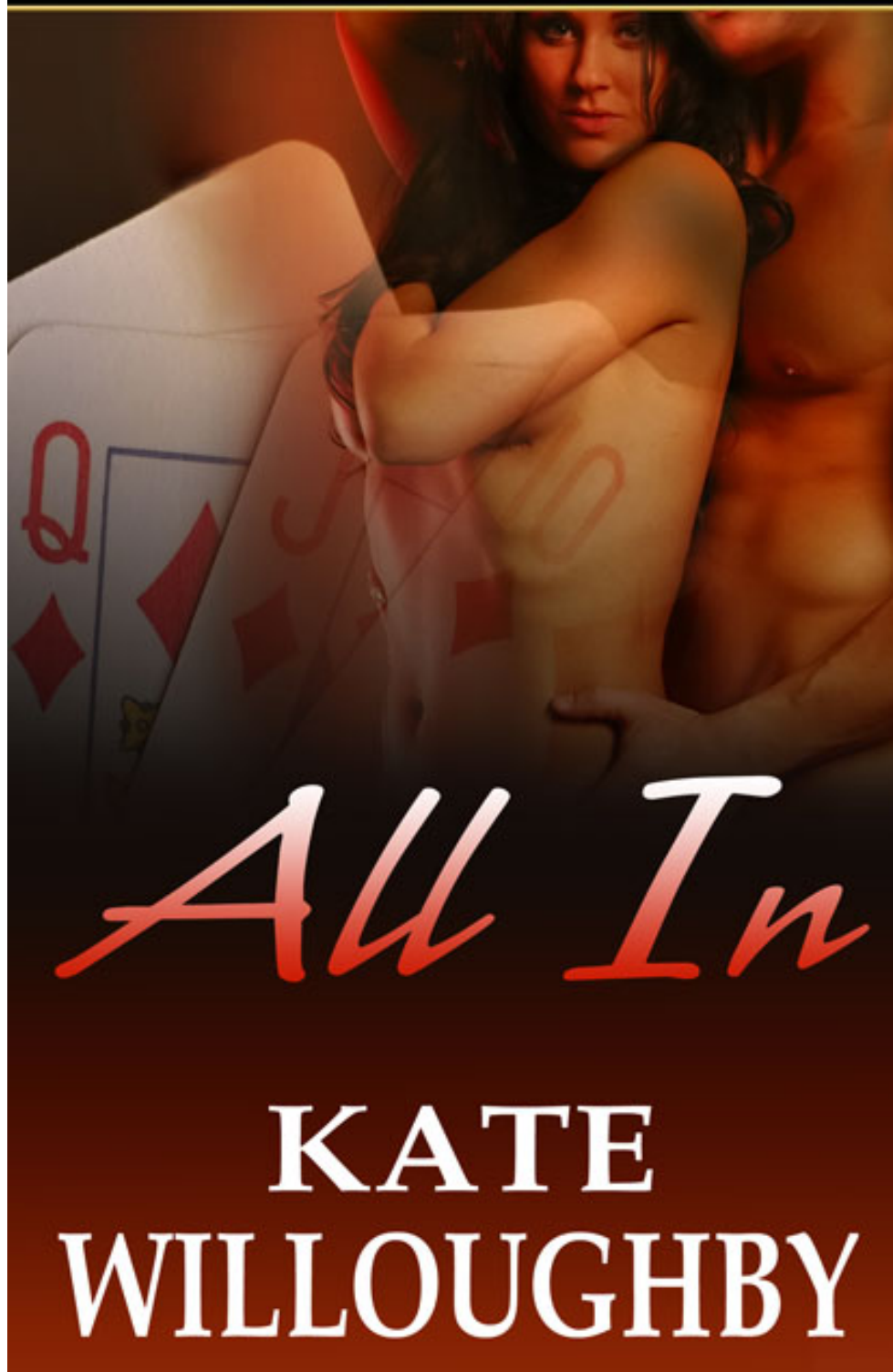


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



# *All In*

KATE  
WILLOUGHBY

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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All In

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# ***ALL IN***

**Kate Willoughby**

## *Dedication*

For Mary, a Wonder Woman of an editor, whose bright encouragement and spot-on suggestions made a short story into a novella I'm proud to put my name on. Thanks also and always to Janet and D'Anne. I couldn't wish for better critique partners or friends. My writing is always much better after they've run it through the wringer, my life richer for their presence. Full credit for naming the Be-Wished series goes to Lisa and RG. Thank you, ladies! Finally, I want to acknowledge my family. My writing is only possible because of their support and understanding.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## **Chapter One**

Mariah Hughes stared at the young woman who had just entered the shop and wondered if it was bad manners to ask if she was off her medication.

Knowing it was definitely bad customer service to do so, she asked instead, "Who are you again?"

Wearing a sleek sandstone business suit and a pair of pointed-toe pumps, the woman had her short black hair in a slicked-back style, chic and professional. After removing her sunglasses, she flipped open a snakeskin wallet to display a shiny badge made of what looked like mother of pearl. The writing on it seemed to be part of the natural iridescent pattern.

"My name is Davina Traherne, UWF."

"UWF?"

"Universal Wish Federation. License number 14-007," Davina said with a wink. "Great number, huh?"

"Yeah, sure. Fantastic."

Sighing, Mariah decided there should be a law that all the kooks—even the well-dressed ones—should be restricted to a one-mile radius of the Strip where they would blend in with the Vegas tourists. But even one mile might still be too close to her specialty chocolate shop.

Davina cleared her throat. "Now I'm afraid I'm running late today, so let's get down to business. According to my records, you made a wish on May 25<sup>th</sup> of last year, contingent upon a woven bracelet. Said bracelet detached from your wrist at 0930 today, which means your wish is now scheduled for completion."

Davina pulled out a slick-looking electronic device and dialed up a video. Dumbfounded, Mariah watched a muted clip of herself and her friends, Paige and Livvy, goofing off on that weekend cruise they'd taken together last year. During an excursion onshore, the three had bought woven bracelets from a street vendor in Cabo. Legend had it that if you made a wish on the bracelet when you tied it on, the wish would come true when the bracelet eventually fell off. On the make for some man meat, the three had made some outrageous wishes, but they'd been so drunk on margaritas that Mariah couldn't quite remember what she had wished for. All she could recall was that their wishes had pushed them into gales of tipsy laughter.

"You guys were pretty snookered," Davina said with a snort.

"This is some kind of joke," Mariah said, glancing around suspiciously. "I'm being filmed right now for some reality show, aren't I?"

Tucking the mini video player into her satchel, Davina shook her head. "No. I'm completely serious. To prove it, I'm authorized to grant a good faith wish. Nothing big like a million dollars or the cure for cancer. Something trivial, but make it quick."

Mariah shrugged. What the hell. Maybe if she humored the woman she'd go back quietly to her room at the asylum. "Okay, I...ah...wish the order I got this morning for that bachelorette party was finished."

Davina smiled. "Done."

An instant later, two boxes of life-sized chocolate penises appeared out of nowhere, each wrapped in cellophane and a red ribbon that read "Julie's Last Hurrah". In the air around the boxes a faint glitter hovered and faded away, like the aftermath from fireworks.

Mariah gasped.

Davina smirked. "Told ya."

Reeling from the impossible feat, Mariah gingerly picked up one of the chocolate penises and examined it. It felt solid. In fact, it looked exactly like the prototype she'd shown the client the previous week, down to the last detail.

Davina leaned an elbow on the counter. "Now, you didn't specify a time limit for your wish, and we usually fall back on a default twenty-four-hour period, but maybe you and I can make a little deal."

She glanced around Mariah's high-end chocolate boutique, her eyes glittering. "I could extend your playtime a few extra hours if you could see your way clear to giving me that chocolate purse over there. The one with the pink sugar flowers."

Mariah frowned. "If you want chocolate, can't you just snap your fingers for it?"

"I wish," Davina answered, chortling. "Get it? 'I wish'?" She shook her head. "No, my magic is only operational when I'm on the clock, and then only for wishers."

Ever the wheeler-dealer, Mariah crossed her arms. "Well then, you should know that inside the purse are a comb, lipstick, a coin purse *and* a cell phone, all made of chocolate, but," she said with a dramatic pause, "wait here. I have something you should definitely see."

Hurrying to the back, she grabbed the mold she'd purchased for a man's fiftieth birthday six months ago. When Davina saw the outline of a gun with the numbers 007 on it, her eyes went huge. "*I want it.*"

"I can even make it say 14-007."

Incredibly, tiny lavender fireworks began going off around Davina's head. "*I really want it.*"

"Make my wish last for three days then, and I'll throw this in with the purse."

"Two days and we have a deal."

"Done."

Cackling with glee, Davina thrust a hand into her pocket, pulled out a small gray pamphlet and slapped it on the counter. "Here are all the stipulations of the grant. It's not like you can sue us, but humans these days like to be informed. Your forty-eight hours begin at the moment you and the subject touch, rounded up to the nearest hour. I'll be back on Tuesday for the chocolate. Have a good time."



Then, in a kaleidoscope of colors and a few bars of the Bond theme song, Davina winked out of sight.

Mariah blinked hard, still skeptical even though she'd seen everything with her own eyes. A moment ago, Davina had been standing there and now she wasn't. This was way beyond Siegfried and Roy. Those types of tricks had to be set up in advance, and Mariah knew no one had arranged anything strange in her store.

She rounded the counter and stared at the spot on the floor where Davina had been, then slid her eyes reluctantly toward the box of candy cocks. They were still there. She couldn't deny what had happened. The proof was in the pricks.

Mariah went to the phone near the cash register and dialed her friend Livvy.

"Liv, it's me. Remember on the cruise when we got drunk and made wishes on those bracelets?"

"Sure. I'm still wearing mine."

Mariah paced behind the counter. "What did I wish for?"

"World peace."

"Livvy, be serious! It's important."

"Jeez. Jump down my throat for making a joke."

"Sorry. Just answer the question. Please."

"Well, my memory of that night is kinda vague, but I think it had something to do with that Tucker guy..."

*Oh my God.* It all came rushing back.

Mariah stammered a hurried goodbye and hung up. She now remembered her wish with mortifying clarity. I.C. Tucker. A guy she'd spent one night with six years ago but remembered like it was yesterday. The man she fantasized about regularly in the privacy of her room, lights out, battery operated boyfriend in hand...

Usually he was silhouetted in the doorway of her bedroom wearing a Stanford t-shirt and jeans. With that lazy, rolling gait of his, he sidled up to her bed and looked

down at her, his face still in shadow. Then he knelt and caressed her cheek before lowering his head and giving her a kiss that spread pleasure throughout her body in a slow, warm wave. His mouth was gentle at first, but grew more and more demanding until they were both breathing hard and ready for skin against skin.

In the way of fantasies, Tucker was then suddenly naked and in bed with her, his long, lean body stretched out against hers, his cock hard against her thigh. She imagined his lips dragging along her sensitized skin until he captured a nipple in his mouth, making her moan. The slick suction drove her wild, and down below she was so wet that when he moved between her legs to finally enter her, he slid in like he belonged there. His hard length stroked in and out, filling her over and over again, faster and faster until his hips were slamming against hers and both their bodies were slick with sweat. His eyes locked onto hers and they came together. Mariah arched upward and shuddered with ecstasy just as he exploded inside her, gasping her name like she'd saved his life.

Of course, that was fantasy.

That one night with him six years ago had definitely been the best sex of her life, and she didn't think she'd embellished it *too* much, except for the gasping of her name. So this wish deal was either going to be a complete dream, as in *my-world-is-about-to-be-rocked-forever*, or a total disaster, as in *why-couldn't-I-have-just-wished-for-a-winning-lottery-ticket?*

*Brrring.*

Startled, she glanced at the phone. God, was it Tucker? Could Davina have worked that quickly? With a suddenly sweaty palm, she picked up the receiver and looked at the caller ID. It wasn't a number she recognized.

"Thank you for calling Chocolate Fantasies. This is Mariah. Can I help you?"

"Yes, my name is Rhonda Jones and I'd like to order a wedding cake. It's a bit of a rush job. I need it on Monday."

"A rush wedding job? Hey, this is Vegas," Mariah said with a laugh. "How many guests are we feeding?"

"Twenty or so."

"No problem then."

As she took down the customer's information and made an appointment to meet that evening, Mariah relaxed. Her heart had gone into overdrive at the notion of talking to Tucker on the phone. With all this UWF craziness going on, she had imagined him calling her up and saying, "Hey, baby, what are you wearing? I hope it's nothing, because for the past six years, I haven't been able to get you out of my mind."

But it wasn't him. It was just another order.

## **Chapter Two**

As I.C. Tucker approached the sleek black limousine, he nodded at the driver. It was Al, a guy who had driven him many times over the years.

"How was your flight, Mr. Tucker?" Al asked, rounding the rear of the limo and opening the trunk.

"Pretty good," Tucker replied.

"Win any good pots lately?"

Tucker chuckled as he slung his bag into the trunk. "Enough to be able to walk away from a game in the Bahamas."

Not just "a game", though. One of the biggest of the year—the Island Poker Invitational. Jesus, Tucker thought as he got into the car, he must be crazy to walk away from that. The prize pool was going to be upward of two million, but he'd had no choice.

Al got behind the wheel and pulled out into traffic. "I've never been to the Bahamas," he said.

Tucker slouched in the leather seat and stretched his legs out. What a relief after being cramped in the airplane all day. "The Bahamas is one of the most beautiful places in the world, Al. Beaches, babes and booze."

"Sounds like a paradise. Why are you in Vegas then? Nothing big going on here unless you count the ADA Convention. Fifty thousand dentists. I hate dentists. They're lousy tippers."

Tucker laughed. "I got called in to watch my good buddy Tony go down for the count."

Al eyed him in the rearview mirror. "But there aren't any boxing matches scheduled either."

"No, I mean he's tying the knot. It's a spur of the moment thing."

Al laughed. "Well, he came to the right town for that."

"Yeah. I'm anxious to meet his bride. She'd better be one hell of a woman."

\* \* \* \* \*

The first thing Tucker did upon arrival was check in with the man who always took care of his accommodations, meals, tabs and so on while he was at the Venetian. He wanted to make sure Tony and Rhonda had been taken care of. Dustin assured him that the move from the Ace High where they had been staying before had been painless and that the soon-to-be-wedded couple was now comfortably ensconced in the hedonistic Prima Suite.

"Remember," Tucker said, "I want everything charged to me. And I mean everything. The chapel rental, the reception...if they buy lip balm in the gift shop, I'm picking it up."

"Of course, sir." Dustin handed Tucker his room key. "Ms. Mercier is meeting with them right now working out the details of the wedding and reception. I have a note for you here and I took the liberty of obtaining your usual bankroll for you."

Tucker took everything from him, signed the slip, then peeled off a fifty. "You're right on top of things as usual. Thanks, Dustin."

"My pleasure, sir."

Tucker read Tony's scrawled note on the elevator ride up. *"Holy fuck. You're out of your mind! But I'm not complaining. I know you can afford it. Come to our room as soon as you blow into town. Rhonda wants to meet you."*

Tucker wanted to meet her too. He hadn't been kidding when he'd told Al she'd better be one hell of a woman. He and Tony were like brothers, inseparable since grade school. It was only four years ago, when Tucker moved to Atlantic City, that they'd

lived in different cities. But even with a few thousand miles between them, he and Tony were as close as ever, and Tucker wasn't about to see his best friend jump into a quickie Vegas marriage with the wrong woman.

A little before eight p.m., he went to Tony's room. The Prima Suite had a private hallway off the elevator where a vase of fresh flowers and a bowl of Godiva chocolates rested on a refined birch table. But someone else was standing at the door to the suite, ringing the doorbell.

Their gazes met and the woman's eyes went wide, her cheeks pale. In fact, she stumbled back to lean unsteadily against the wall. That's when, to Tucker's astonishment, he realized he knew the woman. *Had* known her. In the Biblical way.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked, concerned. "Mariah, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm fine. I'm fine," she stammered, tucking a lock of brown hair behind her ear. "I'm just...really surprised to see you."

"Yeah, me too." He wasn't sure if he should shake her hand or what. The last time he'd seen her, they'd been naked.

He'd met her in Palm Springs, a Californian destination of choice for college kids on spring break. They'd both entered an amateur poker tournament, a first for both of them. After the games had concluded, they'd really hit it off, talking for hours in an open-air café on Palm Canyon. Afterward they'd found their way back to Tucker's room for a long night of hot, sweaty sex—the kind of sex that stood out in his memory like a bonfire on the beach.

The next morning they'd parted ways amicably and, at least on his part, with considerable regret because it had been more than great sex. It had seemed to him like the more they'd talked, the more they'd connected. It was like when night was coming and a couple of lights went on here and there, and then a few more, and a few more, until eventually the entire city was aglow. Mariah was definitely the type of girl he would have followed up with, but with him living in San Jose at the time and she in Vegas, trying to pursue a relationship seemed a lesson in futility.

He looked at her now, six years later, and felt the same connection. It didn't feel like any time had gone by at all. If they started talking again, he was sure they'd just pick up their conversation like it had been yesterday.

Either that or they'd tear each other's clothes off.

Wearing a pair of chinos and a pink blouse, she was carrying a file that blocked his view of her breasts. And God help him, he remembered her breasts. They'd been really sensitive. The slightest touch had gotten her hot and bothered, so he'd fondled and sucked on them a lot that night. She even came once when he'd pinched the nipples. Nothing like giving a woman multiple orgasms to boost a man's pride. Or stiffen his cock, for that matter.

The door to the suite flew open.

"Tuck!" Tony bellowed. He was a hulk, six feet tall with a chest like a barrel. He yanked Tucker into a bear hug that had him gasping for breath.

"God, it's great to see you! Come on in. Rhonda's been dying to meet you." Tony turned to Mariah. "And you must be the cake lady. Come in, come in, both of you."

Tucker entered the marble foyer, nodding with approval at the sumptuous rooms. He had asked Dustin to spare no expense and the man had done them up right. The décor was the epitome of elegance, like something out of a ritzy magazine. Tucker was no interior designer, but he knew good taste when he saw it. The peach and brown colors made him feel welcome, as did the pretty woman turning to greet him. She had short hair and huge Audrey Hepburn brown eyes. When he stepped down into the sunken living room, she beamed and walked toward him with both hands outstretched.

"Tucker," she said, kissing his cheek. "I'm so glad to finally meet you. Tony has talked my ear off about you. I can't believe that not only did you move us here to the most beautiful hotel I've ever seen, but you're offering to pay for our entire wedding. Tony's lucky to have a friend like you."

Tucker glanced at Mariah, a little embarrassed. While he was glad to have enough money to spoil his friends with, he didn't necessarily like his wealth to be advertised.

"It's not an offer," he said. "It's a done deal. And Tony and I are more than friends."

"Yeah, we're lovers, honey," Tony said, throwing his arm around Tucker's shoulders. "Later, you, me and him, we're gonna have us a threesome."

"Oh are we?" Rhonda said.

"Yeah, hot and heavy, two on one. What do you say?" Tony said, an exaggerated leer on his face.

Putting one hand on her hip, Rhonda winked at Tucker then said to Tony, "Need help satisfying me, T-man?"

Tony blinked a couple of times. "Wh-what? Hell no," Tony sputtered. "That's not what I meant..."

With a soft chuckle, Rhonda went to him and placed her hands on his broad chest. "I know, silly," she said warmly.

Then she whispered something in his ear, and that's when Tucker realized Tony had it bad. The big guy practically melted into a puddle of sentimental goo, and even though it was vaguely sickening, Tucker felt a little jealous. It had been awhile since he'd been involved with a woman in a more than casual way.

"I hate to break up this love fest," Mariah said with an amused smile on her face, "but I have some sketches I wanted to show you."

Rhonda's eyes lit up. "Yes!" She grabbed Tony's arm and pulled him over to the couch. "I think you're really going to like this."

They all sat down around the coffee table where Mariah displayed a colorful rendering of a cake shaped like —

"Our cars!" Tony shouted. He pointed to the Corvette, exclaiming, "That's where I proposed to her!"

Tony had been restoring a beat-up '75 Corvette for going on eleven years. Piece by piece he'd fixed it up, painstakingly hunting down the parts he needed, and he still wasn't done. Tucker wasn't sure he'd ever be done, but Tony's joy was in the process.



And apparently Rhonda shared a love of classic cars. When Tony had called him to announce the engagement, Tucker had been treated to a good half hour of Rhonda accolades. Number one on the list was that she was a car aficionado too. She came from a family of car buffs.

As the others discussed cake and filling flavors, Tucker examined Mariah's drawing. It was pretty impressive, depicting the 'Vette and Rhonda's '67 VW microbus in minute detail, down to a "Just Married" sign hanging suspended between the vehicles. On the VW, one of the transom-style front windows was open, making it seem as if the car was winking.

Tucker would never have suspected this degree of talent from the girl he'd met so long ago. From what he remembered, she had been at a crossroads, unsure what direction her life was going to take. He was interested to see how she got into the cake business.

"So how did you two meet?" Mariah asked as she tucked the sketches back into the file.

Rhonda smiled. "At my parents' garage sale. My dad had advertised that he had some spare Corvette parts and Tony came by to check them out. The minute he drove up, I fell in love." She sighed. "With his car."

Slapping his thigh, Tony guffawed. "See why I love her, Tuck?"

Mariah laughed too. "That was when?" she asked.

"Only seven weeks ago," Rhonda said.

"That fast!" Mariah exclaimed.

"Yeah," Tony said. "I always thought it would take me a long time to decide if a certain woman was the right one, but it didn't. I knew within the first hour of talking with her that she was it. It was like getting hit with a ton of bricks."

Rhonda mock punched her fiancé. "See why I love him, Mariah? It's not every girl who gets to be compared to masonry."

They spent a few more minutes discussing the details of delivery, the cost and such before Mariah stood to go. Tucker decided to leave too. It had been a long day and he hadn't eaten dinner yet. Besides, Rhonda and Tony clearly wanted some privacy. They'd been holding hands and making lovey-dovey eyes at each other for the past fifteen minutes.

Out in the hallway, he and Mariah approached the elevator.

"So I wasn't sure if you'd remember me," he said, pressing the button.

"Of course I remember you," she said, her cheeks turning the color of a Cosmopolitan. A crease appeared in her brow. "It's not like you blended in with the scores of guys that I've slept with."

Tucker grimaced. This was not the way he'd hoped the conversation would go.

"That's not what I meant," he said.

"No, I'm sorry. I know you didn't." She sighed as a soft ping announced the arrival of the elevator. "It's just...I feel really awkward."

"You shouldn't," he said as the doors slid open. "How about we grab a bite downstairs and catch up with each other? What do you say?"

"I think that'd be great."

They stepped inside and he pressed the lobby button. As she looked up at him, she licked her lips, and even though he knew he shouldn't, he found himself eyeing her breasts. God, how he wanted to cup them in his hands and hear her moan again, feel the nipples harden again against his palms. Was she really as hot as he remembered or had his brain just wishfully embellished the memories?

Tucker decided it didn't matter. If he was reading her body language correctly, she was as turned on as he was. She leaned against the wall of the elevator, her lips parted and her breath coming a little faster. Six years or no, the sparks that flew that night in Palm Springs had rekindled.

Suddenly his plan to take her out to dinner seemed a waste of their time.

Tucker took a step toward her, fully realizing he was now thinking with his cock but unable to switch gears. He couldn't, not when her eyes had locked onto his and she arched her back, pushing her breasts toward him almost imperceptibly.

Fuck it, he thought and leaned in and kissed her.

## Chapter Three

Mariah knew Tucker was going to kiss her, wanted him to kiss her, and when he did, she responded as if she'd been in hibernation. Part of her thought, *you're being a sleaze*, but most of her didn't care. Davina had come through and Mariah wasn't going to squander this once-in-a-lifetime chance to fulfill a fantasy she'd been fostering for six long years. Hell no. She slid her arms around his hard body and kissed him back.

His mouth moved over hers and he made a low sound of enjoyment that seemed to reverberate inside her. As he threaded his fingers through her hair, cradling her head, she moaned too. Sensations swept through her. Tucker was here in the flesh, pushing his tongue into her mouth, crowding her against the wall. She wasn't imagining the spicy smell of his cologne or his strong arms —

*Ping.*

They both stepped hurriedly apart as the elevator doors opened and a family of four entered. Mariah touched her lips as if she could brush away the evidence, but the parents and kids paid no attention to them. The doors closed again. Tucker coughed and looked at her questioningly, his finger pointing first to the lit lobby button and then to the one reading thirty-five. Mariah bit her lip. The moment of truth.

Digging up her nerve, she pushed the button for his floor and earned herself a slow smile that sent shivers of anticipation through her body. He sidled up next to her as the elevator descended, and when it spilled the family out into the noisy lobby, more people got on. He draped an arm around her shoulders and traced his finger back and forth across her collarbone. It was an excruciating exercise in patience to wait as people got on and off the elevator. She had to work hard to keep her breathing even.

At last they arrived at his floor. He took her hand and led her into another private hallway. As he inserted his card key into the slot, Mariah gasped.

"What's wrong?" he asked, alarmed.

"What time is it?"

He glanced at his watch. "It's almost nine. Why?" he asked, a slight frown wrinkling his forehead. "Do you have another appointment you forgot about? Do you turn into a pumpkin?"

She laughed. Little did he know.

"Yes. Three hours from now I'll be fleeing your room with one naked foot."

He chuckled, but that frown remained as he paused. The light on the door lock turned from green to red again.

"You know," he said, looking pensive, "if you've changed your mind and you want to grab that bite after all, that's okay. I swear I don't know what came over me in the elevator. I don't usually come on so strong."

It's the wish in action, Mariah thought. The wish that expires at nine p.m. two days from now.

"Oh no," she assured him. "I haven't changed my mind."

Tucker relaxed and with a smile and half-closed eyes, he cupped a hand around the back of her neck and claimed her mouth again. Heat flared as if they hadn't been interrupted at all. When his tongue sought entrance, sliding along her lips, she parted them eagerly. Pleasure flowed through her veins like chocolate lava and her body throbbed, aching to be filled with Tucker's hard cock.

Murmuring softly to her, he kissed her again and again, dipping his tongue each time to taste her more and more deeply. The hand on her waist slid up until his thumb brushed the side of her breast. *Oh God.* Mariah involuntarily tightened her arms around him as lust surged between her legs. They stood locked together a while longer until Tucker finally broke away, breathing rapidly and with a slight smile slanting his lips.

He pushed his key into the lock and opened the door. Then, taking her hand, he led her inside.

“Bedroom’s this way,” he said, guiding her through an elegant sitting room.

Mariah had never been in a suite the likes of this before tonight. Her usual accommodations away from home were of the “just seventy-nine dollars a night” variety. As she had in Tony and Rhonda’s room, she caught the aroma of several fresh flower arrangements. To the left was a sunken living room with two separate seating areas. A floor-to-ceiling fountain gurgled over natural stone, giving the room a Zen feel. To her right was a half-bath, all marble and shine. And the bedroom... Rich, dark blue brocade swooped down from the ceiling, showcasing the elaborately carved headboard of a truly majestic bed. The furnishings alone probably cost a year’s rent.

She would have gone to the window to enjoy the panoramic view of the Strip, but Tucker was waiting for her at the foot of the bed, one knee cocked, his head slightly tilted. Her eyes flitted to the front of his jeans where she detected a sizeable bulge.

The view of the skyline could wait.

She reached for the button on her pants, but Tucker shook his head as she drew near.

“I’d like to do that, if you don’t mind,” he said with a crooked smile. “Undressing a woman is one of my favorite parts of sex.”

“I actually remember that,” she replied.

Going for the top button of her blouse, he circled it with his index finger ever so softly before popping it open. He traced the skin revealed by his action and Mariah’s pulse raced again. With an intense look on his face, he slowly undid the rest of the buttons, teasing her with the lightest of touches, raising her anticipation to almost unbearable levels. Then, finally, he spread the halves of her blouse apart and bared the tops of her breasts. Mariah trembled as he brushed his thumbs against her bare skin. Looking into her eyes, he smiled as he grazed the hardened tips with his knuckles through the material of her bra, and her knees went weak as desire flooded her. She could feel wetness seeping from her body to soak her panties.

"If we go on at this pace," she said breathlessly, "it'll be Christmas before I'm naked."

Tucker chuckled. "Hey, there's nothing wrong with taking our time. You remember how good it was that second time? Nice and slow..."

God, did she remember. The sex had been like floating on a raft down a gently flowing river. They had gone where the current took them, flowing together as if they'd been lovers for years instead of having just met the day before. He had been amazingly adept at reading her reactions and body, and later, after replaying that night over and over in her mind, she'd concluded that there was something to be said for sleeping with an observant poker player.

"You're so beautiful," Tucker said. "More beautiful than I remember."

He hooked his fingers under her bra straps, pulling them down until the cups came away from her breasts. Then, bending down, he flicked his tongue against a nipple, causing her to gasp. Jolts of pleasure zipped from her breasts to between her legs. He did it again and again. *Flick, flick, flick.*

"God, don't stop," she said, holding his head to her.

Tucker moaned. She tasted so, so sweet. The shortened breaths she took and the way she was massaging his head told him he was doing something right. Loving the pebbly texture against his tongue, he pulled a tip into his mouth and sucked rhythmically, his hands on her waist. When one nipple was wet and swollen, he moved to the other. The increasingly ardent moans she made aroused him, and his cock strained against his pants.

At last, breathing hard himself, he leaned back and pushed her blouse and bra off her. The clothes fell to the floor and he let his eyes linger on her breasts, glistening from his attention. He almost hated to leave them alone, but although topless was good, naked was better.

His fingers itching with anticipation, he sat on the bed with her facing him and unfastened her chinos. Carefully, slowly, he eased down her pants and pale pink underwear, enjoying every inch of skin as it was revealed to him, bit by silky bit. Her smooth, curved stomach and the soft bush at the apex of her thighs mesmerized him. She had gorgeous legs too—legs he wanted her to wrap around his hips when he thrust into her.

After she stepped clear, he took some time to appreciate the sight of her nude body. The light from the hallway cast intriguing shadows on her skin that made him want to discover what was hidden from his view. When she came back within reach, he used his fingers as well as his eyes to explore her smooth skin—from the flare of her hips, down along her legs and then back up again to her mound. The peppery, sweet aroma of her pussy made his mouth water, and he couldn't help but slip a thumb between the moist curls to a deeper wetness. She was so slick it was all he could do not to throw her onto the bed and shove himself into her right then, but if he'd learned anything from poker, it was that haste, literally, never paid. Attention to details, patience and concentration brought the best rewards, and he knew from experience that Mariah was worth the effort.

"Lie down," he said softly.

"But you're still wearing clothes," she said, but she was pulling back the covers and doing as he asked.

"Not for long. I promise."

When she was on her back, he put his hands on her inner thighs to coax her legs apart and nose his face between. Then, using the flat of his tongue, he slowly opened her. The flavor of her arousal swam in his mouth, ethereal and heady, like smoke from a really fine cigar. He lapped it up with long licks, loving the slickness of it on his lips and chin. Her tiny clit joined the game, poking out from its hood. He gave it some special attention. Soft, questing kisses, some gentle sucking and she was shifting restlessly on the bed, moaning.



"Tucker, God, that's good," she gasped, raising herself up on her elbows. "I said don't stop before, but this time I really mean it."

"I'm not going to stop until you come," he said. "You're pretty good at it, if I recall."

Flopping back down on the mattress, she laughed. "Hey, it's one of my favorite pastimes."

"What a coincidence. Mine too."

He dipped his head and resumed licking her, but with a little more intention this time. More pressure, more intensity, suction...penetration. Not one inch of her pussy went untouched. He wanted her to fold right now, to give in to the inevitability of coming hard on his face. The way she was twisting the bed sheets in her fists told him she was close. He redoubled his efforts, devouring her like a starving man until at last she stiffened and cried out. Her hips came off the bed, but he stayed with her, hands on her ass cheeks, face buried between her legs. She convulsed against his lips, dripping the thick honey that was going to feel so good on his aching cock—the cock he was going to shove into her in about half a second.

"Oh my God. I can't move a muscle," Mariah sighed as the last spasms of her orgasm fluttered away. "Oh wait, yes I can," she said, and with a satiated smile, she lifted her head and gave him two thumbs up.

Tucker laughed as he stripped and joined her in bed. "Well, all my muscles are in working order. One muscle in particular."

"I'll say," she said, eyeing his erection. Her lips curled upward in a way that made him think of pushing into her mouth instead of her pussy. Luckily, she had the same idea.

"C'mon up. It's your turn. Straddle me."

Raising his eyebrows in surprise but eager just the same, Tucker complied. His cock jutted out, pointing at the ceiling and weeping moisture. Mariah licked her lips as she took him in hand and angled him downward. Mouth dry, Tucker held his breath as she

brought the head between her lips. Holy fuck. A raw groan rumbled from the back of his throat as the sensation of her tongue swirling around him traveled from his cock all the way to the soles of his feet.

"It's okay if you want to move a little," she said, letting his cock slide out of her mouth. "Just be careful not to choke me."

He nodded dumbly, pushing forward until his engorged cock probed her lips. He wasn't going to be able to take too much of this. A good blowjob was something he relished, but this position...this was beyond hot. She looked so vulnerable trapped between his thighs, her mouth filled with his cock. With the goddamn Henry VIII-style bed, he felt like he was some medieval lord getting his due. And wasn't that pretty fucking politically incorrect?

## **Chapter Four**

As Tucker straddled her head, Mariah sucked on the tip of his cock. She enjoyed the give-and-take of this position. Although the man loomed so tall over her, giving the impression that he was overpowering her, she set the limits. This only worked with certain guys, and although Tucker's line of work required him to lie routinely, she trusted him.

Threading her fingers through the thick hair of his groin, she opened her mouth and allowed him deeper inside. He smelled wonderful—earthy, crisp and clean, like the mountains after a rainstorm. As she closed in around the soft head, the fluid leaking from the tip made her tongue tingle, and Tucker groaned as she smoothed it around, slicking up the steely shaft as he invaded even further.

"Mariah...God, that's good."

Tucker shifted his hips slowly and deliberately while she sucked on him. True to his word, after only an inch or so inside, he retreated. As his hard cock entered her mouth over and over, she rubbed her tongue along the underside. She ached to feel him thrusting between her legs the same way, harder and deeper, but that would come soon enough. Right now she wanted to drive him to the edge of orgasm, watch him fight for control, because he wouldn't want to come in her mouth yet. Men liked to prove their stamina.

Besides, that had been her original wish—to satisfy him so completely that he would never be able to forget her, and so far, so good. As he thrust, he stared into her eyes, his own blazing with intensity, but sometimes his head fell back and he exhaled gruffly, like a bull steer building up to a charge. She loved knowing she was the cause of his raw reactions. It made her feel powerful, confident, uber-sexy.

Gripping the headboard, he pumped in and out with short, restrained movements, his muscles flexing. As she let her hands rove up his thighs, his rippled abs and around his back, she marveled at how cut he was. The muscles of his arms and chest looked like something off a male model website. His ass was like granite. The man obviously did more than sit on it at poker tables all day.

Catching her gaze, he withdrew from her mouth completely, one hand on his cock, lifting it up. Suddenly, she remembered that he enjoyed having his testicles licked. With a soft breath, she feathered her lips against the skin of his sac. His rough groan of pleasure rumbled through her.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, “take one inside...”

So she did. She rolled it around in her mouth as he stroked his own cock. His hand pulled on it slowly as he watched her, groaning. After a few moments and with a gruff sound of impatience, he nudged her with it. Obediently, she took him inside again.

“Oh fuck,” he said, reclaiming his grip on the headboard. He only lasted about half a dozen strokes before he jerked backward, breathing hard. “Okay, that’s it. That’s all I can take. Jesus.”

Sliding down her body to lie on top of her, Tucker took her mouth again. His tongue surged inside, no longer coaxing or gentle. This time his kiss demanded and Mariah’s body answered with a desperate stab of need between her legs. Parting them, she put a hand on his hip to urge him, but he shook his head and uttered one word.

“Condom.”

Damn. She’d been so eager to feel him push into her she’d almost forgotten about protection. Shivering when he left her to roll on the Trojan, she welcomed him back with a whimper of desire. Tucker moved quickly into place between her thighs, one hand below to guide himself home.

Mariah inhaled deeply as he entered her with one long, steady push. God, what a rush. Bringing him to the edge had sharpened her own hunger, and he felt so damn

good. She locked her legs around his hips and met him thrust for thrust. Every penetrating stroke drove pleasure through her, and yet it wasn't enough.

"Tucker, please," she gasped. "Harder. *More*."

Jaw clenched, he slammed into her with more force, more speed.

"Please, don't stop—"

Straining toward him, she canted her hips so his groin struck her clit over and over, needing, gasping, but—

"Shit, Mariah, I—shit, shit, shit—"

And with a groan, he came. She tensed as he continued to drive himself into her, his hot breath against her neck. She was almost there. Almost. Just a little bit more...

"Come on, Mariah! Come, damn it!"

His harsh command sent her over the edge, and Mariah arched up as pleasure exploded in a blinding, pulsing release that went on and on. Tucker kept going, ramming himself into her, prolonging her orgasm. Waves of sensation swept over her, dwindling gradually as he slowed his thrusts and then finally stopped moving. With a rough, thorough kiss, he allowed some of his weight to rest on her.

"Amazing," he gasped as she let her legs fall to the mattress. "Goddamn amazing. I think this was better than Palm Springs," he said, fingering a lock of damp hair off her cheek. "Maybe we get better with practice."

"Could be," she answered with a smile. "I'm certainly willing to do some more research."

Chuckling, he pulled out and rolled onto his back with a satisfied groan. "Oh yeah. Me too, but I need to recharge. How 'bout we order some room service?"

Mariah turned on her side and propped her head on her hand. "Sounds perfect."

Half an hour later, dressed in complimentary Egyptian cotton robes, they were feasting on an extravagant buffet in the posh living room of the suite. Because the menu was so extensive, Mariah had been unable to decide, so Tucker ordered anything she

expressed an interest in: gourmet panini sandwiches, poached salmon, sliced fruit, banana pancakes and bacon, champagne and chocolate mousse.

Having worked up an appetite, Mariah served herself from each of the dishes.

"So," she said, "the last time I saw you, you were working on a math degree at Stanford."

"Good memory," he said, piling his own plate with food. "Yeah, ends up I got the degree, but I eventually took up a different line of work."

"You mean poker."

Tucker's fork stopped halfway to his mouth as he glanced at her, surprised that she knew what he did for a living. "Yeah, that's right. Poker. How'd you know?"

"I caught you on TV once or twice," she said, shrugging her shoulder. "You're a regular celebrity."

Tucker turned his attention back to the salmon. "No, I'm not. I'm just a guy who's lucky enough to play cards for a living."

"Hey, don't sell yourself short. From what I've seen, it's damn hard work. You probably can't stop thinking even for a moment in the middle of a tournament. I can't imagine the mental demands of calculating odds like that for hours and hours. That's why I couldn't hack it that time in Palm Springs. I just couldn't keep it up."

"But I didn't make it to the final table that time either," he reminded her.

"No, but you almost did. If that guy hadn't pulled that full house on the river, you'd have made it."

"I can't believe you remember that."

She shrugged and took a bite of panini. "So that tournament in Palm Springs we were in together, was that the beginning of your career?"

"Sort of."

"What made you go into it full time?"

"My buddy Tony." Tucker wiped his mouth with his napkin. "He was always pushing me to try again, saying he knew I could win a big pot if I just tried. So I did."

With a three-thousand-dollar buy-in, Tucker'd had a few doubts, but Tony was confident that his head for numbers and knack for observation would prove him a winner. He was right. Tucker had walked away with ninety-seven thousand dollars. That win had attracted the attention of Dale Branson, a heck of a guy, always willing to share his pearls of poker wisdom. His offer to take Tucker under his wing prompted Tucker's move to Atlantic City. A year later he'd earned half a million dollars. After two years, he'd almost tripled that.

She raised her glass of champagne. "And now you're Mr. Freeze."

"Yeah." Tucker rolled his eyes as they clinked glasses.

"What, you don't like your nickname?"

"It's all right, I guess," he said. "It's a damn sight better than Chilly the Kid."

Mariah laugh-snorted champagne. "I'm sorry. Chilly the Kid?"

"That's what they used to call me in school."

"Oh I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh," she said, not too convincingly. "What does I.C. stand for, anyway?"

He put his champagne down and regarded her with a tight-lipped smile. "Ichabod Cornelius."

"You're making that up."

"No, I'm not. It's a family name. I'm actually the fourth Ichabod Cornelius Tucker, but I don't use the Roman numerals except for IRS forms and stuff like that."

"Well, I can see why you go by Tucker," she said with a sly smile, "but you're anything but chilly."

Tucker grinned when Mariah's naked foot slid up his calf under the table and made its way toward his groin. Grabbing her ankle, he took his rapidly hardening cock and rubbed it against the sole of her foot.

"Hey! Are we skipping dessert?" she asked with a devilish grin.

"Hell no."

Standing abruptly, he wheeled the table out of the way and grabbed the silver bowl of mousse.

"What are you up to?" she asked as he knelt in front of her.

"Just serving up my mousse," he said, drawing the lapels of her robe apart and baring her gorgeous breasts. "Mousse à la Mariah."

He scooped up some chocolate on his fingers and smeared it on one of her breasts. Her nipples hardened immediately and she gave a little scream.

"That's cold!"

"Yeah, but my mouth's warm," he said, coating the other breast.

He put the bowl down and rubbed more of the stuff around her nipples, loving the feel of those stiff peaks. Ruthlessly, he rubbed and rolled them between his fingers until her breathing got heavy and she arched her back, a sex kitten in heat. Some of the mousse had dripped onto her thighs and more of it slid down her stomach as he finally leaned forward and took her breast into his mouth. The chocolate coated his tongue as he swirled it around and around. The sound of her moans made him dizzy with need.

"God, Tucker," she gasped. "You're driving me nuts."

"Good," he said, but she took one of his hands and licked the mousse off his palm on her way to pulling his index finger right into her mouth. Damn if he didn't feel that suction all the way down in his balls.

Time to up the ante. Staring her in the eye, he slid his free hand between her legs. She was dripping with moisture. As Mariah moaned and slid down in her chair, he rubbed her clit in slow, soft circles while she sucked his fingers clean, one by one. Tucker kissed her, exploring her mouth with deep forays of his tongue even as he kept caressing her slick pussy. Her hips shifted against his hand and the provocative sounds coming from the back of her throat made his cock pulse in response.



He slid down her body, kissing her soft skin and hooking her legs over his shoulders. The sight and smell of her luscious cunt intoxicated him. He inhaled deeply as he pressed his mouth to her again. Even though he'd just gone down on her a little while ago, he felt like he was discovering her all over again. The sharp edge of his lust had been appeased and he wanted to prolong the pleasure this time around. Feeling surprisingly serene, he eased his tongue over her pussy in a long, slow lick. Mariah shivered and moaned. God, how he loved her warm response. He slowly delved into all her secret folds, sucking on those plump, pink lips, sliding his tongue into the creases.

With the better lighting he also indulged himself with a leisurely visual tour. Being a red-blooded American man, he appreciated a pretty pussy as much as the next guy, but Mariah...she was so beautiful, especially swollen and slick with desire. She even had a seductive beauty mark hidden near her clit. He found himself unable to resist tickling it with his tongue over and over, if only to hear her soft sighs when he did.

"God, Tucker, yes," she murmured, stroking his head in encouragement.

Enjoying every moment, Tucker urged her toward another climax. He wanted her mindless with pleasure, wanted to be the cause of an endless string of orgasms as he pleased her with his mouth. And then, when she was limp, he aimed to bring her up again as he plunged deep inside her, invading her but sharing the sensations, connecting with her on a deeper level.

With every wet swipe of his tongue she got closer. As he rubbed and sucked, gauging her gasps and reading her body's response, he snaked his hands up and squeezed her breasts, causing her to arch against him. Her nipples stood out stiffly and he pinched them in rhythm with his sucking.

"Oh God," she gasped, clutching his head as her orgasm approached. "Almost..."

Even if she hadn't alerted him, he would have felt the signs of her imminent explosion. Her clit seemed to strain toward his tongue. She held her breath for short periods, tensing her muscles at the same time. As she gripped his head tighter and tighter, her hips moved against his mouth with more urgency until, at last, she arched

up. A throaty cry erupted from her as her cunt spasmed against his chin. She dug her heels into his back and ground herself against his face. And damned if his balls didn't feel like they were going to explode. His blood pressure had to be off the scale. His cock sent one urgent message to his brain like a runaway train.

*Fuck her. Now.*

But when he drew back and gazed at her, that message got derailed. All he could do was stare.

Still wearing the open robe, she lay with her eyes closed, her arms and legs limp. Her inner thighs were bathed with his saliva and her rich secretions, and a flush still heated her cheeks. Slowly, her eyes opened and the smile that lingered on her lips made him forget how sharp his lust had been a moment ago. At the sight of her, splayed like a siren from a lusty myth, he realized that he could easily become addicted to her sultry flavor and the satisfaction he felt when she came. His chest felt full and he smiled back dumbly.

After a long moment, she broke the silence. "This time I can't even move my thumbs."

"That's okay," he said, forcing himself out of his ridiculous stupor. "I'll do all the moving."

Motivated into action, he gathered her up in his arms and carried her back to the bedroom. When she snuggled her face into his neck and murmured about how strong he was, an absurd sense of macho pride suffused him. Hell, if he didn't watch out, tomorrow would find him trying to win an enormous stuffed animal for her at Circus Circus.

Still, he laid her with care on the bed where she stretched lazily, turning on her side. One glimpse of her silky, sleek ass put his body back on track and a strong urge to take her from behind overcame him. He wanted her soft ass cheeks cushioning his hips as he slammed into her over and over. After rolling on another condom, he slid up against her back and lifted her thigh enough to push his cock closer to home.

“Is this okay?” he asked, even as he angled himself, searching for that tight, swollen slit.

When she arched back and christened the tip of his cock with her wet heat, he took that as a yes.

## Chapter Five

Pulled up against Tucker's muscular body, Mariah surrendered to the raw satisfaction of his thick cock invading her from behind. She hadn't thought it could get better than it had just a little while ago, but this...this was incredible. The angle of his entry intensified the sensation of every slow stroke, and she loved the sound of his breath right in her ear.

"You feel so good, Mariah," he murmured against her neck.

Goosebumps spread across her shoulders as he nibbled on her ear. She sighed with pleasure, shifting her hips to meet his unhurried thrusts. There was something magical about being with Tucker, but she didn't want to admit that, because in this case, it *could* be magic, which was still disconcerting.

And yet, what did it really matter? This time with him was a gift, and there was no point in ruining it with useless worry. This reunion with Tucker would be one more memorable event in her life, like a great concert, and when it was over, it would be over.

Determined to enjoy herself, she closed down the logical part of her brain and concentrated on the exquisite friction between her legs. The rhythmic push and pull suffused her with a sense of wellbeing that made her sigh in contentment. It felt as if they were ballroom dancers who knew each other's bodies as well as they knew their own, and the sex was like a routine they'd rehearsed over and over until it was flawless and as innate as breathing.

"I wish we could stay like this forever," she said, reaching back and caressing his cheek.

He nuzzled the back of her neck, sending a wave of shivers down her spine. "That food did rev me up again, but not quite that much," he said with a soft chuckle.

"Slacker." She pinched his earlobe and he laughed.

Thirty-four floors below, people bustled among the shrill shrieks and beeps of the casino while in Tucker's room only gentle murmurs of pleasure and the soft shush of sheets could be heard. For a while, they didn't speak, just enjoying each other and the easy rhythm. Tucker caressed her stomach, her breasts, her face as he rocked against her and Mariah slid her hand along his hip, occasionally squeezing his ass as he thrust. But eventually, the leisurely pace gave way to a need for more, and Tucker picked up speed. The steely arm he had wrapped around her waist pulled tighter. He pumped his hips faster and with more force.

Mariah arched her back, meeting his thrusts and moaning. This all seemed so surreal. She'd replayed that night with Tucker so many times in her head. She'd embellished it, changed it around, spun it into scenarios she'd be embarrassed to admit to, but having him here in the flesh surpassed all of that. Sure, in her fantasies she could make him do and say whatever she wanted, but the reality of having him initiate things, respond to her of his own free will, coerce her with that open, quirky grin he had...nothing could beat that.

She abandoned herself to the feelings building inside her. Their bodies were slick with sweat and he was grunting in her ear as he thrust harder and faster. Tucker bent her forward, then grabbed her hips and used his arms to hold her immobile as he rammed himself into her. Mariah gasped for breath. The pleasure quickly surged, then crested, and she shuddered violently as she came, her back arching, every muscle going taut. Tucker let go too. His hoarse cry echoed in the room as he drove into her one last time.

A few moments later as the last vestiges of her climax fluttered away, Mariah tried to catch her breath. Her skin felt suddenly cool from perspiration, but Tucker pulled her gently toward him until she felt his warm chest pressed against her back.

He kissed her shoulder. "Feel good?" he asked.

"Mmm. Better than good."

"I'll never be able to look at chocolate mousse without thinking of you." His arm tightened around her.

Mariah gave herself a mental high-five. Her feminine pride would live on that compliment long after Tucker was gone.

Still, maybe after all this was over, she'd FedEx some mousse to him every year just to remind him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, Mariah lay content in the massive bed with Tucker spooned against her back again, one of his arms around her waist and a hand clasping her breast. She'd half-believed that she was going to wake up and find it was all some dream, like in the movies, but no. The sunlight on her face was real. The tenderness between her legs was real. Moreover, the growing hardness of Tucker's cock against her butt was real.

"Hey, Cinderella, you're still here." Brushing a thumb back and forth over her nipple, he nuzzled her neck with feathery kisses.

"I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? Hell no. I was worried that I was going to wake up this morning alone with your shoe. I hope *you* don't mind *this*," he said with slight shift of his hips. "It's a guy thing we can't control."

"I know," she said with a chuckle.

He sucked her earlobe into his mouth and whispered in her ear. "But, you know, if you wanna..."

As his hand closed more tightly around her breast, an irresistible wave of desire rolled through her body. Feeling slightly slutty, she wordlessly arched back in invitation, and with a low, appreciative murmur, he slowly filled her. God, it was superb, that smooth, leisurely connection. It was like a sunrise, or like a dark truffle

melting on her tongue. Mariah went with it, reaching behind to caress his hip as he moved inside her. No wonder they called it morning glory.

As he withdrew just as slowly and slid back inside, he asked, "Is that okay? Are you too sore? Because I can stop if you want."

"No, no, it's all good," she said, rocking back against him.

"Thank God," he said with a chuckle, "because cold showers are not my —"

He stopped moving.

"Damn, damn, damn," he said.

"What?" she said. "What's wrong?"

He pressed a warm kiss against her neck and slid out. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back. I forgot a condom."

Tucker hustled to the bathroom, but as he returned with a fistful of Trojans, the phone rang. Dumping the packets on the nightstand, he swore under his breath.

"Damn it. I'll make it quick, I promise," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed and picking up the receiver.

Laughing, she said, "I hope you mean the phone call."

After sending her a mock expression of outrage, he barked into the phone, "This better be good."

When Mariah reached over and took one of the condoms, Tucker grinned and nodded at her.

Lying down, one hand behind his head, he said, "Normally I would, big guy, but today I can't."

Mariah started to rip open the packet, but then a devilish idea took hold.

"Yeah," Tucker said, "but those Voted #1 polls are always so — oh *shit!*"

He grabbed the bed sheet with one hand and stifled a groan as Mariah engulfed his half-hard cock with her mouth.

"No, no," he stammered as Mariah started sucking. "I-I just stubbed my toe."

Like a woman possessed, she devoured him. Mouth and hands. Lips, tongue. Suction, rhythm, rough and quick. Tucker's legs quivered and so did his voice.

"No, you're better off here at the hotel. Their buffet is great. I've had it a zillion—fuck! No, it's just—" His eyes rolled back into his head. "My toe is killing me."

Loving his reactions, Mariah cupped his balls with one hand, fondled, squeezed. With her other hand she gripped his shaft and stroked hard.

"Yeah," he said through gritted teeth. "Sorry. Can't. Gotta go. Bye."

Tucker threw the phone aside. "Holy shit, Mariah. I'm gonna come. Like in the next ten seconds."

She pulled back just long enough to blurt, "Go for it."

Tucker's breath came in great gasps as she resumed sucking. She felt his balls tighten up and then his hips rose off the bed. Every muscle straining, he exploded. It was such a rush to feel him coating her tongue and filling her mouth with spice and sex. She reveled in every pulse of his cock as she gulped down spurt after spurt of hot cream.

After a long moment, Tucker raised his head and caught her gaze. "What a goddamn beautiful morning!"

Pleased with herself, she grinned and slid out of bed. "I'm just going to..." She gestured toward the bathroom.

"Yeah, go ahead and do what you gotta do. I'll just lie here and recover. Holy shit."

Not bothering with a robe, Mariah sauntered into the spa-like bathroom where she closed the heavy door behind her. The place was as big as her mother's kitchen. A Jacuzzi tub, roomy enough for six people, dominated. There was a separate Italian marble shower, two sinks and a toilet area that had a door for privacy.

She was heading for that area when a voice said, "Hi! How's it going?"

With a gasp, Mariah snatched a towel from the rack to cover herself. Recognizing Davina's voice, she looked for the fairy but couldn't find her.



"Psst. Look up."

Davina's sunny-cheeked face smiled at her from the flat-screen TV bolted in one corner. This time her suit was sage green with silver accessories, and her hair hung straight to her chin in a pageboy cut.

"You scared the shit out of me!" Mariah hissed.

"Sorry, but this is the first time you've been alone since the countdown started."

Embarrassed to the tips of her toes, Mariah pulled the towel tighter around herself. "Have you been spying on us?"

Davina made a face. "Please. I'm not a voyeur. I came to find out if you're having a good time. I've been monitoring the aura around you two, and the readings are promising."

Through the door they could hear Tucker singing "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning", and Mariah laughed softly in spite of herself.

"Yes," she said, actually glad to share this with someone. "I'm having the time of my life."

Davina bit her lip and squealed. "I'm so happy for you! I haven't had an HEA in forever. Stupid Gertie keeps lording her Cupid of the Month Award over me and it's getting old. Now, did you read the pamphlet I gave you?"

"Not yet. Why?"

"You should read it. If you want whatever's going on between you and Tucker to continue—oh crap." Davina looked at something off-screen and blanched. "Oh no." She returned her attention to Mariah. "Look, I have to go."

"What's wrong?"

"I can't explain right now," Davina said. "Just read the darned pamphlet. It's all there. I'll talk to you soon."

The TV blacked out and Mariah stared at it for a moment, trying to figure out what was going on. What the hell was an HEA? Considering Davina's reference to a Cupid of

the Month Award, Mariah figured HEA probably meant Happily Ever After. Did that mean Tucker was supposed to be her Prince Charming? And, for the sake of argument, if he *was* and they rode into the sunset together on a white horse, could she live with the fact that he'd been magically coerced into loving her?

Unsure what to do, she went about her bathroom business. She could ask questions all day long but wouldn't get any answers until she got the pamphlet from the shop and read it. When she returned to the bedroom, Tucker was hanging up the phone.

"I just ordered some more food," he said, still in bed. "It's a blatant attempt to get you to stay longer, but if you're as hungry as I am, you won't be able to resist."

Unshaven, his thick hair tousled, he looked so sexy with the bedcovers covering only the lower half of his naked body that Mariah didn't hesitate before getting back into bed with him. With a big grin, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

"After breakfast we can take a bath together, huh? Then do some shopping maybe. I have to buy a wedding gift and I could use some help."

"The wedding itself isn't enough?" she asked.

"Nah. They gotta have something to open, don't they? What? What is that? You're frowning." He kissed her, a small frown on his face too.

"No, it's just that I do have to make the cake. Remember?"

"Oh yeah. I forgot about that." He put a hand on her hip and stroked her gently. "Well, if you help me, I'll help you. How's that?"

She gave him a dubious look. "*You help me?*"

"Sure. I can actually wield a pastry bag pretty well."

"I'm impressed you even know what a pastry bag is."

"Tony's mom Claudia is really into gingerbread houses. I mean *really* into it. She even has a website dedicated to her creations. Anyway, when I was a kid we lived on the same street and every year she'd coerce me and Tony into helping. I pretended it was a pain, but I actually really liked it."

"With experience like that, I guess you're hired."

His eyes lit with excitement. "Awesome. What's my wage?"

"Your wage?" she said with a laugh. "Well, obviously you don't need money..."

"No. Got plenty of that," he said. Then he glanced down at her mouth and grinned. "But I'll tell you what I *do* need."

"What?"

"More kisses." He stole a quick one. "From you." He stole another. "Genuine Mariah kisses."

"I didn't know my kisses were that valuable."

"Hell yes! In fact, they should be traded on the stock exchange."

Mariah laughed, feeling happier than she had a right to be.

"I think seven kisses an hour oughta do it," he said, his brown eyes warm and playful. "And I want a little payment in advance."

Mariah laughed again as he pulled her close and collected half a day's worth.

## **Chapter Six**

“What do you think of this?” Tucker asked Mariah. He gestured toward a fazzoletto vase that looked as if someone had captured tropical fish inside it.

They were in a specialty shop in the Grand Canal Mall attached to the hotel. Inside was an exquisite collection of Venetian glass and collectibles—everything from key chains to glass jewelry to hand-blown vases and figurines. Once she got a gander at some of the price tags, Mariah walked with her purse tucked under her arm so she didn’t inadvertently knock something over.

“Fazzoletto vases like this one are shaped by holding the glass upside down and gently folding in, like the handkerchiefs they’re named after,” said the shop girl.

“It’s gorgeous,” Mariah said. “If Tony’s the type of guy who gives flowers, then this is a great gift.”

“Oh yeah,” Tucker said with a chuckle. “When they fight, Rhonda’ll be getting apology flowers. The bigger the fight, the bigger the bouquet.”

“Tony sounds like a smart guy,” Mariah commented.

Tucker leaned against the display case and crossed his arms. “Yep. That’s because everything he knows about women, I taught him.”

“Oh brother,” Mariah said, rolling her eyes. “It’s a wonder you can walk upright with such a big head.”

Tucker joined in her laughter as two young women walked past, glancing at him oddly.

“Actually,” he said, “I can’t take credit for the apology flowers idea. That’s one of Bill’s Marriage Mandates.”

"Who's Bill?" Mariah said, looking longingly at a millefiori silver pendant on display. With so many colors in it, she could wear it with practically anything. Too bad she didn't have a spare seventy-five bucks.

"Tony's dad. The DeLucas are the happiest couple I've ever seen. So whenever Bill drops these pieces of advice, I listen." Tucker told the shop girl, "I'd like this wrapped for a wedding, please."

When he pulled out his money to pay, Mariah bit back a gasp.

"Holy moly, do you always walk around with that much cash?" she asked him as he peeled four hundreds off an obscenely fat wad and handed them to the girl.

"In Vegas, yeah. That way I can be prepared if I see a game I want to join."

"And what's that?" she asked, pointing at a playing card tucked in with the cash.

"This?" He flipped the worn card so she could see it was a king of clubs. "This filled in a royal flush for me three years ago at a big tournament in Commerce. The only one I've ever gotten. I keep it for the memories and the luck," he said, fingering a torn corner edge.

"Did you win that tournament?"

Tucker didn't get a chance to answer, because the girls were back. One was a blonde with big hair and enough eye makeup to paint one of the frescoes in the hotel lobby. The other wore a formfitting top that ended about six inches above a navel pierced with a thick rod of silver. They brought with them an oppressive nebula of perfume that made Mariah think of opium dens and eunuchs with scimitars.

"Excuse me," one of them said with a high-pitched giggle. "Aren't you that poker player? Mr. Freeze?"

Tucker rubbed his nose and tucked his hands in his pockets. "Yeah, that's me."

"See? I told you," the blonde said to her friend. Then she turned back to Tucker. "I'm Lindsay. I saw you win that thing in L.A. What was that? Like a million dollars?"

"Something like that," Tucker replied offhandedly.

As the cashier returned with the vase, beautifully wrapped with white floral paper and a lace and ribbon bow, Mariah tried to think of something witty to say that would show these girls that Tucker wasn't available right now, but before she could open her mouth Lindsay said in a more subdued voice, "If you're not doing anything tonight, I'm having a little party. It would be just you, me and my best friend Jenn." She slipped her arm around Jenn's waist and gave her a kiss that was more than friendly.

Mariah couldn't believe their nerve. She'd never wanted to physically assault anyone her entire life until this moment, but as the two girls sidled up to Tucker, the urge to shove them away from him was so strong she had to grip the edge of the counter and grit her teeth.

The sleazy bitches were lucky they were in a glass shop.

Tucker managed to extricate himself from their tentacles, shaking his head. "Gee, it's nice of you to invite me, but I've got plans," he said, picking up the wedding present. "You ready, Mariah?"

"More than ready," she replied, trying not to growl.

Lindsay finally noticed Mariah's presence and her black-rimmed, predatory eyes narrowed, but then with a shrug, she said, "Well, just remember, sometimes three's not a crowd. Room 1546 if you change your mind."

Seething, Mariah tried to walk out of the store at a normal pace. The very thought of Tucker jumping into bed with skanky bimbos like Jenn and Lindsay made her want to scream.

And that made her wonder if she was a skanky bimbo herself. Was she? She frowned as she and Tucker made their way back to the bank of elevators. She didn't think so. She'd never thrown herself at him like those two had. She and Tucker had a *mutual* attraction.

"Sorry about that," Tucker said over the beeps and bells of the slot machines.

"I don't think they even knew your name," Mariah said, still indignant.

"They probably didn't."

"Does that happen to you a lot?" she asked, feeling idiotic but needing to know anyway.

"Oh, every once in a while a woman comes on a little strong with me during a tournament. Especially if I'm winning. It's pretty embarrassing. For them and for me."

Upstairs in his suite, Tucker put the present on the counter of the wet bar. Beyond him, Mariah could see into the bedroom, and the sight of the unmade bed gave her an irrational, infuriating urge to stake her claim by having sex with him again, as if she needed to prove something.

She wondered if this was the influence of the wish.

But wish or no, she resisted. She may *have* these irrational feelings of jealousy and possession, but she didn't have to act on them. When she and Tucker parted ways, she didn't want him to think of her with a bad taste in his mouth. She wanted to be a memory he could look back on with fondness when he was old and crotchety. Just like *she* was going to, damn it.

## **Chapter Seven**

As planned, Tucker went with Mariah to help her with the cake, but she brought him, not to a home kitchen like he'd expected, but to an honest-to-goodness store. Chocolate Fantasies was in a corner mall about fifteen minutes from the Strip. The shop front boasted a classy pink and brown striped awning and there was a logo with swirly letters painted on the window. In contrast, to the right he saw a collectible cards and comics store, to the left, a place that sold cigarettes at a discount. Judging from the outside, he thought she needed a more upscale location, but then, what did he know about business?

"Here it is. My home away from home," she said, proudly leading the way inside.

Tucker grinned as the smell of chocolate enveloped him the moment he crossed the threshold. It reminded him of Mariah. In fact, the whole store reminded him of her—sassy, sexy and luscious.

She introduced him to her shop assistant, Heidi, then spent a few minutes talking business, so Tucker wandered around the store. Her pastry case held the traditional cheesecakes, pies and cookies—all chocolate—displayed on gold and pink patterned foil. On the opposite side she offered a rich selection of chocolate truffles, some of them extremely unusual flavors.

When she ambled over to him, he said, "Chili Pepper Truffles?"

She grinned and pulled one out of the refrigerated case. "Try one."

"Is there like a jalapeno inside it?" he said, looking at it suspiciously.

"No, just red chili powder to give it a kick. Try it."

He took a bite. Chewed and blinked. Gave her a pained smile. "It's th..." He searched desperately for an appropriate adjective but couldn't because his taste buds were staging a revolt.



Mariah laughed and handed him a tissue, which he took gratefully. "Here. Spit it out if you want. I won't be offended."

Tucker rid his mouth of the spicy mixture. "That's what I call 'hot chocolate'."

"I don't like those either," Heidi said. "Here, try this espresso one. It's got ground coffee beans in it."

Tucker nodded in agreement as the coffee flavor gradually expunged the chili chocolate. "Now this is more my speed," he admitted. "My tastes are pretty simple. Man, this is delicious."

While Mariah rifled through some paperwork, Heidi plied him with several more candies, each one more tasty than the last. As the luscious chocolate melted in his mouth, he couldn't help but be impressed by Mariah's setup. He remembered she hadn't really known what she wanted to do with her life. That had been something they'd had in common when they'd met, and they'd spent a while talking about their various aspirations. He'd admitted to a longtime wish to travel the world, maybe as an airline pilot, knowing he had more chance of winning the lottery than flying planes. He'd inherited a love of travel from his jet-setting parents. Mariah had talked about enrolling in art school, or maybe working in the restaurant business.

And now look at the two of them, both successful in their own right. He was traveling the globe, going from tournament to tournament, and she was combining her culinary interest with creativity in the form of her own gourmet shop. He admired her accomplishment, even if it made him feel a little inadequate. Once in a while he still had trouble thinking of poker as work. When he compared what he did with other people's jobs, it seemed so inconsequential, which was why he always participated in any charity event that he was invited to.

It didn't help that his parents weren't particularly proud of him. They weren't the type of people who bragged to their friends about their son's accomplishments, no matter what they were. When he'd earned a scholarship to Stanford they hadn't said much about it beyond mentioning that he'd have to live in the dorm because they were

moving to Chicago. That hadn't come as a surprise. They'd never said so, but he had figured out that they had never planned on being parents and his arrival had been a surprise. Oh, they did everything that was expected of them, but not much more. They were more involved with each other as a couple, and most of his life he'd felt like the third wheel.

Maybe that's why Tony getting married was hitting him so hard. With Rhonda coming on the scene, Tucker was being relegated to third wheel status again. The only solution for that was to find a woman of his own, and maybe Mariah was that woman. But as much as he liked her, he certainly didn't want to turn to her merely out of emotional reflex. Neither of them deserved that.

But what was the alternative? Women like Lindsay and Jenn?

Not if he could help it.

A few years ago, when he was just becoming recognizable to people in the poker scene, he'd had relationships with women merely because they admired his skill at the table and fawned all over him, but he quickly learned that those relationships were a waste of time. Those shiny women were interested in the attention they got because they were with him. They were also needy and demanding.

Mariah was different. He'd noticed her fingering the pendant in the glass store and had half expected her to hint around for him to buy it for her. She hadn't. Most of the women he'd been with in the past few years would have done more than hint, and most likely, knowing the exact amount of cash he had in his pocket, they would have chosen something much more expensive. Not Mariah. She was independent, used to providing for herself and working for what she wanted.

Too bad she had a lousy sense of timing, because he was just about to dive into a slice of Chocolate Earthquake Cake when she put the dessert aside and announced it was time to get to work.

"You're going to be bouncing off the walls if you eat any more chocolate," she warned.

"Don't worry about me," he said, wagging his eyebrows. "I know exactly how to get rid of any excess energy."

"Well, so do I," Mariah said. "It's called whipping cream. *By hand.*"

Tucker groaned loudly and Heidi giggled.

As Mariah propelled him toward the swinging door behind the counter, she said, "Heidi, if you need me, I'll be in back making that cake."

"Okay. Have fun," Heidi said with another laugh.

Behind the storefront was a pristine kitchen of gleaming stainless steel, white tile and large, intimidating appliances. Against one wall were cupboards and employee lockers. Shelving units held neatly organized supplies—bags of flour and sugar, canisters filled with a variety of extracts, stacks of empty cake and candy boxes, some decorated with her signature brown and pink, others plain white. A security monitor suspended in a corner near the ceiling showed the front register where Heidi was greeting a customer.

"Here, put this on," Mariah said, tossing Tucker a striped apron.

He looked at it with exaggerated horror. "It's pink."

"Your powers of observation are astounding," she said, chuckling. "But it's only half pink."

"All right," he said, tying on the apron, "but any more abuse like this and I'm quitting."

"That's an empty threat if I ever heard one," she replied, after getting a bowl and some other utensils. "Because if you quit, you won't get your kisses."

Then she caressed his cheek and damned if his stomach didn't do a funky little flip-flop thing.

"You know," he said, "now that you mention it..."

He grabbed her and pressed his mouth to hers, sliding his tongue in and copping a feel at the same time. Her nipple stiffened against his palm and her breath came a little

harder. He thought seriously about pushing something in front of the door to ensure their privacy, but knew that was going too far. Unfortunately, Mariah must have been of the same mind and ended the kiss all too quickly.

"Okay, back off," she said, her eyes bright with passion. "Heidi might come back here and see us, and more importantly, I have a cake to bake."

"No, *we*," he said, stepping back. "We have a cake to bake."

\* \* \* \* \*

No stranger to a kitchen, Tucker took Mariah's orders and in no time they had several cake pans in the oven and were preparing a large batch of buttercream frosting. While they worked, he talked about his gingerbread house making days.

"Every year during Christmas break, Claudia gears up for her holiday project. There's always some new theme, bigger and better than the last year's."

"Like what?"

"One year she made the Eiffel Tower with a bunch of French shops at the base. She's done Santa's Workshop a couple of times. But the absolute best was when I was about fourteen. She made a haunted mansion with all the monsters wearing green and red. That was a lot of fun. Tony and I went crazy making marzipan zombies."

Tucker's best childhood memories were of Tony and his family. He still flew back to San Jose for holidays with the DeLucas when he could. His parents were inevitably traveling to one destination or another, the more obscure, the better.

"So how did you get started in the cake business?" Tucker asked.

"Well, my niece needed something special for her birthday party, and I had seen this article about making chocolate lollipops in a magazine. They turned out to be a huge hit and a couple of the moms asked if I would do the same thing for their kids' birthdays. After that, a woman wanted party favors for someone's retirement and things just took off. I branched into baking too, as a side thing, but that's turning out to be as lucrative as the candy."

Tucker took some of the dirty dishes to the sink and started washing them. Mariah divided the icing into separate bowls, then started adding food coloring for the different hues she'd need for the cake.

"When did you open the store?"

"Four years ago. It took all my savings and a loan from my parents, but I did it."

"Ah, a risk-taker, just like me."

She paused in the act of mixing up some black icing. "Well, I'll agree that I took a risk, but come on. I'm an amateur compared to you. I've seen you bet the equivalent of two of my stores on one hand."

"Yeah, but that's just money."

Mariah scoffed. "Just money. Easy for you to say. You have plenty of it."

Tucker put the whisk in the drainer and dried his hands. "No, listen. What I mean is that I don't invest my *self* into my work. I mean, come on. Poker's a game. That's all it is. If I lose a hand, all I lose is money. But your store, Mariah...it's you. When I walked in, I saw you all over the place." He smoothed a hand over the stainless steel counter as he walked over to her.

"All right," she said, nodding. "I see what you're saying. Obviously, if I lost the store, I'd be out a lot more than just the money. But you put yourself on the line just as much as I do. If you eat it at the tables, it's public. It's on TV for God's sake. That's got to be tough."

Tucker shrugged. "It comes with the territory," he said, but inside he felt the connection with her deepen. If he wasn't careful, he might find himself falling for her.

And then he decided that maybe he didn't want to be careful.

## **Chapter Eight**

Hours later, all that was left on the cake were the finishing touches. Tucker was piping some silver around the headlights while Mariah added the tiny windshield wipers she'd spent fifteen minutes sculpting out of sugar paste.

"That's goddamned awesome," Tucker exclaimed. "Tony's gonna pop a gasket."

Mariah wiped her hands on her apron. "Well, some of the gasket-popping will be due to you. Personalizing the license plates to say His and Hers...that was a stroke of genius."

Stepping closer to her and focusing on her mouth, he said, "A stroke of genius, huh? Sounds like I earned myself a bonus, boss."

Mariah smiled as he slid an arm around her waist. "Oh definitely..."

"I want it now."

Mariah raised her brows with a glance toward the swinging door. "But Heidi might—"

Tucker shook his head. "No she won't," he said.

A few strides got him to the door. He pushed it open just enough to say, "Heidi, stay outta here for about five. I'm going to be kissing your boss."

Mariah heard Heidi gasp and giggle. "Oh okay! Can I be next?"

Tucker chuckled and let the door swing closed.

"There," he said. "That takes care of that. We have five uninterrupted minutes."

As he sauntered over, his eyes took a leisurely tour up and down her figure in a predatory way that made her skin tingle. Obviously, she didn't look her best after hours in the kitchen, but the wolfish expression on his face made her feel as if she were wearing a slinky teddy and not an icing-smeared apron.

Their lips met and she realized she'd never get tired of kissing this man. His mouth was warm and soft against hers, his arms strong around her. As desire flowed from him to her, she cursed the fact that the door couldn't be locked. When he slid his tongue into her mouth, she leaned into him, pressing her breasts against his hard body. If only he could lift her onto the counter and do her right now, hard and fast.

Tucker broke away, sliding his lips across her cheek and kissing her neck. "This is crazy. All I think about is going to bed with you."

She almost told him she had the same problem, but his stomach chose that moment to growl loudly.

He laughed and hugged her. "Okay, obviously that's a lie. I also think about food. You hungry?"

She rubbed her cheek against his rough one. "Starved. Let's go out for a thick steak and some crispy french fries. And by out, I mean out."

Laughing, he turned her around and untied her apron. "Somewhere other than the hotel? No room service?"

"No. I need to go home and get a change of clothes at least."

He shrugged. "I don't know, the whole naked-under-the-robe thing worked for me...okay, okay!" he said, laughing when she jabbed him playfully in the ribs. "I'll take you out to a real restaurant. With napkins and everything."

\* \* \* \* \*

At her apartment, Mariah holed herself up in the bathroom and dug out the pamphlet. Unfortunately, when she finally dug it out of her purse, she discovered Davina had left her the wrong one. Instead of an explanation of her wish, Mariah had eight pages of company policy regarding the types and extent of mischief that could be inflicted on humans.

"Davina," she said in a low voice, "you gave me the wrong damn pamphlet."

Mariah glanced around the small bathroom slowly filling with steam from her shower.

"I need to see the right one, please. Pretty please with sugar on top."

A few more seconds waiting...

Nothing. Not a tinkle of chimes or a sprinkle of fairy dust.

Damn. Mariah wondered how critical it was that she read this booklet. Maybe it was like those terms and conditions you had to click on before downloading something on the Internet.

But maybe it wasn't.

\* \* \* \* \*

While Mariah showered and dressed, Tucker turned on the TV. The Travel Channel was televising the Island Poker Invitational and he wanted to see who was in the lead, but during the commercial break, curiosity got the better of him and he muted the TV and wandered around her living room.

Looking at her shelves, he saw some chick books—the kind with bare-chested guys on the covers. He squinted at one and decided with some pride that he was just as cut as the model. Also displayed were a framed poem from someone named Paige, a dried-up corsage and a dozen family photos.

He picked one up. It looked like Mariah had a couple of brothers and a sister. Also, judging by the "Welcome to..." road signs that appeared in so many of the pictures, it looked like they spent a lot of vacation time together. Tucker put the picture back, remembering the many family trips he and his parents had gone on. If the resort had a kid's program available, Tucker had been enrolled. His mother and father prized their time alone together.

His cell phone rang. It was Tony.

"Hey," his friend said, "are you still doing the cake lady?"



"What?" Tucker exclaimed, glancing toward Mariah's bedroom door, which was thankfully still closed. "What are you talking about?"

"Before, when I called this morning, you didn't hang up the phone."

Tucker pinched the bridge of his nose as Tony cracked up.

"Man, that's gotta be a world's record. You didn't even know her five minutes!"

Tucker lowered his voice. "Yes, I did. I met her six years ago. In Palm Springs that time."

"No shit. At that tournament?"

"Yeah. She was a player too. It's a small world."

"You're not kidding," Tony said. Then, after a brief pause, "So, ah, are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Still doing the —"

"No!" Tucker glanced again at the bedroom door. "And her name's Mariah. We're going out to dinner in just a few minutes."

"Hey! As a matter of fact, that's why I called. Me and Rhonda want to take you out someplace nice. Bring Mariah."

"I don't know," Tucker said as Mariah came out of her room. She looked hot in a colorful dress with a plunging neckline that he'd be admiring all night. "Hold on."

He put his hand over the phone. "You look hot," he said, honing in again on her breasts. "Really hot."

"Thank you," she said, blushing.

"Tony wants to take us out. I can tell him no if you'd rather not."

"No, that sounds fun," she said, fastening a bracelet on her wrist. "I know you haven't seen him for a long time."

With a thankful smile, Tucker got back on the phone and hammered out the details with Tony. The four of them were to meet at the steak place at the Bellagio.

"Rhonda wants to see the fountains," he explained after hanging up.

"I don't blame her," Mariah said. "They're beautiful."

"Hey, wait a sec. Before we go, I want to see who's at the final table at the IPI. I was supposed to be there, but I had to come be the best man."

Mariah moved so she could see the TV as Tucker got the remote control and turned up the volume.

"Yeah, see?" he said. "No surprises...Gary, Kho, Sumner. Whoa, and Tran. I'm telling you that kid's on the rise. He's a cagey son-of-a-bitch. Real good at protecting his stack, but when he smells weakness, he'll make a move real quick. He really had me sweating last time we played."

Mariah scoffed. "Oh give me a break. That guy doesn't hold a candle to you. You dusted him at the Bay 101 and the Bellagio Five Diamond. Not to mention that beautiful win at the Mirage in May."

A little stunned at the unexpected accolades, Tucker cocked his head at her. Not even Tony kept track of his wins like that. Pride swelled in his chest and he had a humble quip on the tip of his tongue until he saw her face flush with embarrassment.

Uh-oh.

Mariah snatched the remote from him and fumbled with it, trying to turn off the TV. She wished with all her might that the rewind button worked for real. All she needed was to go back to before she opened her big mouth, because she'd lied before when she said she'd only caught Tucker once or twice on TV. Tracking his progress on the World Poker Tour was her guiltiest pleasure, and while she knew this behavior probably qualified her for membership in Stalkers Anonymous, she had actually set it up as an erstwhile reward.

The fact was, Tucker was in town all the time, and because the damned Internet had handy schedules posted, it was easy as pie for her to go online and see he'd be at the

Mandalay Bay on such and such days. But to purposefully/accidentally put herself in his path would have been pathetic and too much like those bimbos in the glass shop. So instead of putting herself on a Tucker starvation diet, she allowed herself to watch him on TV.

Unfortunately, as a result she'd become a bit of a WPT armchair expert and now he knew it.

Tucker laid his hands on her shoulders and squeezed gently. He tried to catch her eye, but she just couldn't meet his gaze.

"You watch the World Poker Tour a lot?" he asked softly.

She thought about trying to convince him she just liked the game. Plenty of people followed that show like they did American Idol, but she decided that was cowardly, and frankly, she was tired of the self-recrimination.

"Yes," she admitted, hating the quiver in her voice. "I watch it all the time. And if I'm not home, I TiVo it." What the hell. The cat was already out of the bag. Might as well let the whole zoo out while she was at it.

He didn't say anything at first, but then he scratched his temple and asked in that offhanded way of his, "Because of me?"

Not trusting her voice now, she nodded.

"Oh Mariah."

To her surprise, he gathered her into his arms and hugged her. She went stiffly at first, unsure what was going on, but he had an uncanny knack for putting her at ease. It seemed as if he absorbed her tension into his own body, and after only a few moments, his slow, steady breathing calmed her.

"Don't be embarrassed," he said at last. "If the roles were reversed, I'd have done the same thing." His deep voice embraced her as much as his arms did. "'Cause I never forgot you, Mariah."

Dumbfounded, she finally lifted her head to look at him. He knew about her secret vice, and judging from the tender expression on his face, he seemed touched by it. Like a warm comforter, a sense of wellbeing surrounded her and she felt surprisingly, marvelously free.

“Now, how about we go get that steak?” he said softly. “I think my number one fan deserves some dinner.”

## **Chapter Nine**

Mariah really liked Tony and Rhonda. They were so friendly and so in love that their good cheer was contagious. She found it easy to fall into playful banter with them, as if they'd all been friends for years.

Unfortunately, because they hadn't made a reservation, the four of them couldn't get a table with a view of the fountains, so after dinner they trekked out to the Strip to watch from the railing. Plenty of others gathered there, many with video cameras and some with their cell phones open, ready to record.

While they waited for the fountain show to begin, Tony shared a story from his and Tucker's college dorm days. Once upon a time, Tucker had blacked out Tony's windshields and Tony, of course, had retaliated.

"Going with the paint theme," Tony said, "I carefully pulled up the covers and did his toes while he was sleeping."

"Oh my God." Rhonda's eyes twinkled with merriment. "What color?"

Tony grinned. "Hot pink."

"And you didn't notice the next morning?" Mariah asked Tucker.

Tucker chuckled. "At that time I had a job where I had to get up before dawn, and I got dressed in the dark so I wouldn't bother Tony. Little did I know that he was wide awake and silently laughing at me."

Tony held up a finger. "Wait, you haven't heard the best part! He had a date that night. And the girl freaked out when she saw his toes. Tell them what she said," Tony prompted.

"Oh, and spoil all your fun?" Tucker said with a raised brow.

Rhonda shook Tony's arm. "Come on! What did she say?"

Chuckling, Tony leaned an elbow on the stone railing. "She said she'd never seen anything so sexy. And then she asked if she could suck on his toes."

"No way!"

"Eww!"

Tucker dragged a hand down his face and turned toward the water.

"Did you let her?" Mariah asked, disgusted but curious.

Tony answered before Tucker could. "He never said one way or the other. Tucker's kind of closemouthed about stuff like that."

But Tucker gave a quick shake of his head to Mariah.

Rhonda linked her arm with Tony's. "Well, it sure sounds like you guys had some good times together."

"Those were the days, all right," Tucker said, resting both elbows on the railing. "Sharing a bathroom with ten other people..."

"Tuesday Night Trivia Wars..."

"And most importantly, staying upwind—" Tucker said.

"Of Richter," Tony finished, and they both laughed.

"Richter was always low on cash, and most of the time all he could afford to eat were bean burritos," Tucker explained. "Strange how living in the dorm can be shitty in so many ways but still be the best time of your life, huh, Tone?"

Tony nodded. "Yeah. But now," he said, turning to Rhonda, "the best times of my life are ahead of me."

As corny as Tony's line was, the sentiment behind it couldn't be denied. Struck by a pang of longing, Mariah watched as he and Rhonda shared a kiss just as Frank Sinatra's rendition of "Fly Me to the Moon" began to play. A collective hush fell over the crowd. Jets of water shot into the air in a flowing dance, perfectly timed with the jazzy music.

Although she'd come to watch the fountains countless times before, oh how different it was when a strong, sexy guy put his arm around her and was humming

along with the melody. Tucker's warmth seeped into her body where they touched. His breath stirred her hair as he pressed his cheek against her temple. Leaning against him, she let out a soundless sigh. The moment was so perfect she wanted to tuck it away in a scrapbook.

After the song ended—way too soon, as far as she was concerned—the crowd dispersed. Tony and Rhonda looked ready to call it a night, but Tucker proposed a trip to Risqué, a nightclub at the Paris hotel.

"I've never been there," he said with a gleam in his eye, "but I hear there are couches and beds to lounge around on. Plus, the men's and women's bathrooms are next to each other and the only thing between them is this frosted glass wall."

Mariah thought that sounded perversely interesting, but Tony nixed the idea. "Normally I would, Tuck, but Rhonda and me have to get some sleep. Tomorrow's the big day, you know."

Tucker rolled his eyes. "Aw, come on, Tone. One last hurrah. You don't need that much energy to say 'I do', right?"

But Tony stood firm. "It sounds like a great place, but maybe another time. You guys go on ahead. Dance a little, check out those crazy bathrooms, but drop us off at the hotel on your way."

Back at the Venetian, the happy couple exited the limo, but only after insisting that Mariah attend the wedding. Of course, she agreed. Pamphlet or no, the wish expired at nine tomorrow night and she intended to wring all the time with Tucker out of it that she could.

The limo driver cleared his throat. "Mr. Tucker, you getting out here or you want me to take you somewhere else?"

"Give me a sec, Al." Tucker turned to Mariah. "You know where I'd really like to go?" he asked in a low voice.

"Where?"

"Back to your place." He gave her a half smile. "Is that okay?"

Her place? Puzzled, Mariah nodded.

Twenty minutes later, when she and Tucker were lounging on her plum-colored chenille sofa nursing a couple of beers, she asked, "So why are we here in my boring little apartment and not in your luxury penthouse suite?"

They'd both kicked off their shoes and she had put on some music.

Tucker lifted one shoulder. "I don't know. I'm in hotel rooms all the time. I like your apartment. It's comfortable, lived in."

This surprised her. With his aggressive confidence at the poker table, Tucker seemed like such a man's man that she was surprised he liked the downright feminine flavor of the place.

"Makes you feel like you're at home, huh?" she said with a self-satisfied smile.

He scoffed. "Like home? No. My place isn't really...I don't know. I don't really spend that much time there."

"What's wrong with it? Is it a pit of empty pizza boxes and dirty laundry?"

He chuckled. "No. I'm not a messy person. It's just not, you know, homey."

"Then maybe you need to hire a decorator. If I could afford one, that's what I'd do."

"What I really need to do is just unpack."

"New place?"

"No, I've actually been there over a year," he said with a sheepish smile. "I just haven't put away all my stuff. Most of it's still in boxes. When I'm not traveling, I'm tired from traveling and not in the mood to put stuff on shelves or hang pictures."

"Catch twenty-two." Mariah tucked one leg underneath herself. "Well, *mi casa es su casa*. All I ask is that you don't leave the toilet seat up."

"Oh never. That's another one of Bill's Marriage Mandates."

Mariah laughed. "Bill should write a book."



Tucker took a sip of his beer. "Maybe you're right. He and Claudia have been head over heels for as long as I've known them."

"And it looks like Tony's going to follow in their footsteps."

"Yeah." Tucker's face fell slightly. "Sure looks that way." He put his beer on the coffee table.

"Aw, come here," she said, scooting to the far end of the couch and patting her thigh. "Put your head right here and tell Dr. Mariah what's wrong. You've been pouting all night."

"Have not."

"Well, maybe not pouting, but definitely off your game. Are you a little jealous?"

Tucker hesitated, then with a sigh, stretched out like she asked. "Maybe a little."

"Me too," she said, combing her fingers through his hair. She liked that he felt comfortable enough with her to admit his feelings. "Everyone wants to be in love. It's natural."

"Yeah, but...oh, never mind. It's stupid."

Tucker tried to sit up, but she wouldn't let him.

"Hey, we're not done playing doctor yet," she said.

That got a small smile from him.

"Oh, is that what we're doing?" he asked. "We're wearing too many clothes for that."

Mariah pretended to write on a notepad. "Patient avoids the subject."

"Okay, Doc," he said with a wry smile. "It's just that Tony and I have been friends since grade school. More like brothers, really. All he's got is sisters and I was an only child, plus we lived next door to each other. I probably spent more time at his house than I did mine."

Mariah rubbed his chest soothingly. "I can picture you two as little boys, playing video games or soccer."

"Yeah, you name it, we did it together. And even though we don't see each other as much now—I'm always on the road, you know how it is—I feel like I'm losing him." Tucker made a disgusted noise. "Shit. Listen to me. I sound like a jilted lover."

"Hey, I felt the same way when my sister got married. Seriously. I went through a period where I didn't feel like I could ask her to do things with me, and when I *did* ask her, I'd feel resentful when she had to make sure Sean didn't have something else planned for them. So I know how you feel, but trust me. It'll pass. Things are never going to be the same between you and Tony because Rhonda's always going to be there now. That's a fact. Not a bad one, though. Just one that'll take some getting used to."

"Yeah, I know," he said with a sigh.

"In the meantime, eat chocolate. That helps no matter what's bothering you."

They exchanged a long look before a corner of his mouth lifted. "I hear getting naked is a good remedy too."

She thumped him playfully on the stomach and he laughed.

"I swear," she said as he sat up. "You're the horniest man I've ever met."

He gave her a mock injured expression. "How can you say a thing like that to your own patient?" He stole a quick kiss. "You're going to permanently damage my self-esteem."

"No, not at all," she replied, leaning her head back as he kissed her neck. "It just means that you're ready for the next part of your therapy."

"The sexual healing part, I hope."

She inhaled sharply when he cupped her breast. "You got it," she breathed.

With a sinful smile, he slid his hand around her neck and kissed her again. His tongue slipped between her lips and heat suffused her like it always did, but tonight Tucker's kiss seduced instead of ignited, and as he pulled down the fabric covering her breast and caressed her naked skin, he murmured about how good she felt and how beautiful she was. His voice seemed to seep into her body and heat her up from the

inside. By the time he drew back from her mouth, her panties were soaked and she was flushed with desire.

“Not here on the couch,” she said.

He nodded and followed her to her bedroom where she lit one of the chocolate scented candles she kept on her dresser. He held her gaze as they undressed on opposite sides of the bed. When they were both naked, they met under the covers. Tucker slid his arms around her and covered her mouth with his again. The feeling of his long, lean body pressed close was sublime. Her skin felt abnormally sensitized. She was supremely aware of the hair on his legs as they rubbed against hers, the play of muscles in his back, the hard heat of his cock along her thigh.

When he moved down and took her nipple between his lips, she shuddered. Nothing in her whole life felt as good as Tucker making love to her. As before, she found herself trying to memorize every sensation, every action, so that later, if they parted ways again, she’d have a new cache of memories to draw on. But it was hard. She wanted to forget about the past and the future and just live for the now, the now of his lips kissing her shoulder, his hand skimming her waist, his body moving over hers as she parted her legs.

She moaned as he sucked on her. He pulled on the sensitive tip in a lazy rhythm, almost absentmindedly, like he intended to go on like this for hours. His cock pressed against her pussy, but he didn’t try to enter her yet. Slow and easy seemed the theme tonight.

Mariah let the sensations roll over her like a summer breeze across a meadow. His strong hand caressed her other breast, kneading it and occasionally grazing the nipple with his thumb until she moved restlessly beneath him. The wet suction made her throb with longing, and when she thought she couldn’t stand it anymore, he captured the other breast with his mouth, pulling on it with a soft rhythm that she felt in warm pulses between her legs. Then she felt his hand there, probing her swollen pussy. He groaned as he eased a finger inside.

“God, Mariah. You’re so wet.”

His finger moved in and out, adding layers to the languid sensations building within her. Moving back up, he kissed her again, more deeply this time. His mouth took hers so thoroughly that she felt like she had no power over herself at all.

When he finally put a condom on and slid inside her, the feeling of his cock slowly filling her while they kissed brought her to the brink of tears. It was so incredibly wonderful, she didn’t want it to ever end. What had started as a lark, a carefree sexual caper, had morphed into something more – much more.

She loved him.

He was everything she’d ever wanted in a man. His uncanny skill at poker amazed her. When he played, he was like a computer – she could almost see the synapses firing in his brain. Yet despite the fame and wealth, he remained surprisingly humble. He was loyal, supportive and so sexy that just one lazy smile had her panting. And most of all, he treated her like a queen.

The question was, how did he feel about her? And if he did care for her, were the feelings genuine or were they conjured by magic, destined to disappear at the appointed hour?

She looked up at him as he gently rocked against her. He smiled and tears threatened again. To hide them from him, she wrapped one leg around his hip and rolled until she was straddling him. She wasn’t going to ruin things by exposing too much emotion too soon.

Tucker placed his hands on her waist and gazed up at Mariah. Some of her face was in shadow and her eyes were closed. Her pearly skin reflected the light from the windows, giving her an ethereal appearance, like a moon goddess. She looked so goddamned beautiful it felt as if a giant hand were squeezing his chest.

Keeping his eyes on her face, Tucker slid his hands up to cup her breasts. He’d been eyeing them all evening, counting the moments until he could finally feel their soft

weight in his hands. Her nipples tightened as he pulled on them gently, and she arched her back when he pinched harder, then squeezed.

He'd meant it earlier when he'd said all he could think about was fucking her. For the past twenty-four hours, he'd been obsessed with sex, and yet tonight it was more than just physical pleasure. Although he reveled in the feeling of her tight pussy sliding up and down his shaft and how her ass brushed his balls with each stroke, tonight he somehow felt a deeper connection with her, like he was drawing to a flush, one card at a time.

Her breathing grew erratic. She began to ride him harder, shifting her hips more quickly, demanding more, taking it. But it didn't seem to be enough. Covering his hands with her own, she opened her eyes and looked down at him.

"God, Tucker," she said in a strangely intense tone, "I want it so much. Please, please give it to me."

She spoke with such longing that he wasn't exactly sure she was talking about sex, but everything in him damn well wanted to give it to her. He levered up so they were eye to eye and he could enfold her in his arms. With her breasts pressed against his chest, his cock embedded deep inside her, he kissed her.

"Okay, baby, okay," he said. "Whatever you need. I promise."

With one arm around her waist, he leaned forward until she was on her back, her head at the foot of the bed.

A frown creased her forehead and she closed her eyes to him again. Anxious and restless, he braced himself with both hands and started pumping. He was on a mission now. Fuck the hell out of her. Fuck her hard and fast. Give her a mind-blowing climax, because damned if he was going to see that pleading look in her eye again.

With a desperate determination, he drove into her over and over. Their bodies slapped together in a fierce tempo and Mariah clutched his shoulders and met him thrust for thrust. It wasn't long before he was sweating with the effort to keep pounding

her while withholding his own orgasm. He wasn't sure how much longer he could keep the pace without losing it.

"Come on, Mariah," he said between breaths. "Come for me, baby."

"Don't stop, Tucker, don't—"

She dug her fingernails into his arms and he thrust even harder.

"God, I—right there, Tucker! There, there—"

And she came. Thank God. Calling out, she arched off the bed, squeezing his cock with her tight, wet pussy. Almost crying with relief, he gave in too. His orgasm hit him so hard, he felt delirious, like his circuits had overloaded and he was in danger of blacking out. But he didn't. He felt each and every powerful blast, sharing Mariah's pleasure, realizing it magnified his own in a way he'd never experienced before.

Slick with perspiration and gasping for breath, he rested some of his weight on her. She lay beneath him, her eyes still closed, her face turned to the side. Even though he was still deeply embedded inside her, he couldn't help but feel she had closed him out somehow, and damned if that didn't bother him.

## **Chapter Ten**

The next afternoon while Rhonda was getting her hair done, Tony met Tucker for lunch at the Asian place inside the Venetian casino. They each ordered their food, and then Tony, being Tony, cut to the chase.

“So the cake lady, Mariah, she’s pretty special. You serious about her?”

Tucker pulled his chopsticks apart and examined them for wayward splinters. “It might sound crazy, but yeah, I think maybe I am,” he admitted, somewhat relieved to be able to discuss the situation with his friend. “She’s funny and sexy...smart and a hell of a businesswoman. In fact, you and Rhonda need to go see her store before you go home. It’s a high-class place, really impressive. And her chocolate kicks ass. Honestly.”

“Rhonda loves chocolate.”

“And wait until you see the cake. I helped make it.”

“You’re kidding me,” Tony said with a laugh. “Mom’d be proud.”

Tucker nodded. When Claudia inevitably found out about his part in creating the cake, he knew she’d exclaim over his piping skills. As reserved as his own mother was, Claudia was the opposite, happily demonstrative and generous with her praise and approval.

“So,” Tony said as the waiter delivered their potstickers, “assuming she’s good in the sack, Mariah sounds like the perfect woman.”

Tucker speared Tony with a look.

“Hey, I know. Off limits.” Tony popped a potsticker in his mouth. “But you have to admit,” he said around his food, “it’s important.”

“Yeah, I agree it’s important,” Tucker conceded. “And just so we can put this business to rest once and for all, Mariah and I are good in that department.”

Tony's irrepressible grin returned. "Yeah. I *heard*. Remember?" Tony cackled and Tucker had to laugh too.

"Not only that," Tucker said, dipping one of the appetizers into the sauce. "She likes me."

Tony chuckled. "Also important."

"No, I mean she *really* likes me."

As Tony chowed down a couple more potstickers, Tucker explained how faithfully Mariah had followed his progress on the WPT.

"No shit?" Tony said, washing down his food with a slug of Coke. "She's not psycho, is she? She didn't seem psycho."

"No. Come on, she's not psycho at all. She just, you know, carried a torch for me." Tucker tapped a finger on the table, wishing he had a stack of poker chips to shuffle.

"I'll say. And what about you? You think about her since then?"

"Yeah, sure. Once in a while I wondered what would have happened if we'd tried to make a go of it, even though we lived a million miles apart. She and I really clicked, you know what I mean? We talked for hours. Like you and me used to do at the dorm."

Tony nodded. "Well, I think you oughta see where it goes with her, because I'll tell you what. The universe dropped her back into your life for a reason. And what are the odds that she happens to be the woman me and Rhonda hired for our cake? Astronomical."

"You got that right."

"Yeah, and you know odds," Tony said, pointing his chopsticks at Tucker for emphasis. "Maybe you were supposed to hook up with Mariah six years ago, but you blew it. Maybe you're getting a second chance."

Tucker ate the last potsticker. Tony wasn't telling him anything he hadn't already figured out. He'd known since last night he wanted to pursue things with Mariah. When he was on a winning streak, he strove to control his excitement, because high



emotion during a game, whether it be anger, elation or fear, could ruin you. But with Mariah, all bets were off. His feelings for her refused to be corralled—not that he wanted them to. Whenever he was with her, the world seemed...better, brighter. He compared it to those times when he was inside a casino, playing for hours in the cavelike, smoky environment. When he finally ventured outside, he was always struck by the clarity of the air, the sense that he'd emerged from a self-imposed dungeon. Being with Mariah was like that. All it took was her presence—no, actually, all it took was for him to *think* of her—for him to feel wondrously and vibrantly alive.

"Earth to Tucker," Tony said. "Food's here."

Tucker blinked. "Sorry. I was thinking."

Tony studied his face and then asked in a falsetto, "What are you thinking about?" Then he batted his eyelashes, bringing a half smile to Tucker's lips.

"Actually," Tucker said, coming to a sudden decision, "I'm thinking about moving here. I'd be close to the action and save a lot on airfare. That kind of thing." He dug into his fried rice, spearing a shrimp.

"Airfare. Right," Tony said with a chuckle. "Sounds like a good career move."

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside her store, arms crossed, Mariah looked at the pink and brown awning and the gorgeous hand-painted "Chocolate Fantasies" sign, trying to summon up the pride she usually felt at her achievement. Instead, she got nothing but anxiety and the sense that somewhere in Fairy Central, or wherever Davina's headquarters were, a picture of her was displayed with a digital clock—the kind that counted tenths of a second and the red LED numbers flashed too quickly to see.

Last night she had wanted to enjoy herself without thinking about consequences, but with the arrival of morning came the niggling worry that the pamphlet was important after all. Davina had said, "If you want whatever's going on between you

two to continue..." And that "if" had started flashing in her mind too, like a two-letter warning beacon. Every "if" had a "then". What was the "then"?

Mariah rubbed her temples. Damn Davina for even putting the idea of a Happily Ever After into her head. Damn Livvy for ever suggesting they buy those stupid bracelets and damn Paige for arranging that weekend cruise in the first place. For that matter, Mariah thought, pacing in front of her store, damn anyone who ever wrote an HEA story. She was beginning to feel like Happily Ever After was the adult version of the Santa myth. No matter how hard you tried to believe in it, eventually you grew up and realized it was bullshit.

Why couldn't she have just wished for bigger boobs or some beachfront property in Malibu? Neither of those things came with wrenching heartache looming in her future. She'd already gotten a taste of *that* when Tucker had left her place two hours ago so she could get ready for work. Shakespeare lied when he'd said parting was sweet sorrow. There was nothing sweet about it. Parting, when you were in love, pretty much sucked.

Mariah had tried to act as if nothing was bothering her, but Tucker's powers of observation were too keen. He knew something was going on, but thankfully he didn't question her about it because it wasn't as if she could have said, "Yeah, my wish fairy gave me the wrong pamphlet and so now I'm worried that we're not going to end up riding toward the royal palace tomorrow in a sparkly pumpkin carriage."

With a look of horror on his handsome face, Tucker would have immediately rescinded his invitation to accompany him to the wedding and relegated Mariah to his Nutcase-Women-I-Wish-I'd-Never-Met file.

*Beep beep!*

At the sound of an electronic horn, Mariah turned to see Davina pulling up on a bright red Vespa scooter. Dressed in a black pantsuit, lavender silk blouse and some European-looking sunglasses, the fairy parked and joined Mariah in front of the store.

"It's about time you showed up!" Mariah snapped, both relieved and angry. "You gave me the wrong pamphlet!"

Davina removed her helmet and fluffed her hair, curled and bouncy today. "What are you talking about? I did not."

Mariah stalked into the store with Davina on her heels and dug the booklet on fairy mischief protocol out of her purse. "What do you call this?" she said, shaking it at the fairy.

Squinting at the title of the pamphlet, Davina paled. She cursed under her breath and rubbed her fingers together. Amid a glittery sparkle, a different pamphlet appeared in Mariah's hand.

"Okay," Davina said curtly. "No harm done. That's the right one. Sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry?" Mariah exclaimed. "Do you have any idea the hell I've been going through wondering what was in this damned thing?"

"Well, it hasn't exactly been a picnic on my end either," Davina retorted. "The higher-ups found out that I extended your wish an extra day and now I have a warning on my record. Not only that, but from now on they're going to be watching us very carefully. Just the slightest deviation from the rules will result in immediate annulment of your wish."

"Annulment? What the heck does that mean?"

"It means they press the equivalent of the rewind button and Tucker goes back to where he was before the wish went into effect."

"What happens to me?" Mariah asked.

"Well," Davina said, glancing down. "You get rewound too, but whereas Tucker's memory is erased, you remember everything."

Mariah clutched the pamphlet in her fist. The sudden anxiety that erupted in her stomach was worse than when she'd applied for her business loan, worse than the time she'd lost control of her car when a tire blew out. Unless she misunderstood, a lifetime of happiness was on the line. She had a chance at true love. But unlike with the loan or the blowout, she could still influence the outcome. She may have stood on the sidelines

before, watching and wanting for six long years, but not this time. This time, she was going to act.

Nailing Davina with a no-nonsense glare, she said, "Tell me what I need to know right now. Spell it out in plain English."

Davina smiled grimly. "Like I said before, your aura readings are promising for an HEA, about an eighty-five, but you have to tell him. You have to tell him about me, and the wish and everything."

"What?" Mariah gaped at the fairy, her stomach bubbling anew. "I need a rum ball. What do you mean tell him everything?" Mariah took two truffles out of the refrigerated case and handed one to Davina before putting the other into her own mouth. The potent liquor flowed over her tongue, sweet liquid courage.

"You have to explain about the bracelets and the wish. Full disclosure. All or nothing."

"By 'all' you mean the whatchamacallit. The HEA."

Davina wrinkled her nose. "Well, not exactly. Damn, I hate this part, explaining the fine print."

"If I'd had the right pamphlet in the first place, you wouldn't have to."

"Look," Davina snapped, "I'm getting enough flak from the higher-ups as it is. I don't need it from you too."

"Okay, I'm sorry. I'm just trying to understand the situation. This is my life, my future we're talking about."

Davina sucked some residual chocolate off her fingers. "I know. Believe me, I know, but you have no idea what kind of pressure I'm under. My quarterly review is coming up, the monetary wish percentages are on the rise and I haven't had a damn vacation in I don't know how many years. I can't afford to take time off! Do you *know* what the divorce rates are doing to the Love Index?"

Mariah stared at Davina and wordlessly handed her two more rum balls.

"Thank you," Davina said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to unload on you."

"It's all right. Everyone needs to vent once in a while."

Davina ate her chocolate. "Mmm. This helps a lot. Thanks. Now where were we?"

"All or nothing?"

"Oh that's right. Like I was saying, there's no guarantee here. An HEA is never a sure thing. See, the magic created the situation for you and Tucker to meet up again. That's all. We don't fiddle with feelings. Whatever's developed between you two is authentic, but—and this is a big but—if you want True Love with capital letters, you have to come clean before the wish expires."

"Or else...what?"

"Or else it's annulment time. You remember. He doesn't."

"But I don't even know how he feels about me."

Davina slanted her a look.

"Okay," Mariah said. "Let me clarify. I know he likes me. But love? Come on. It hasn't even been two days."

"But you love *him*."

"That's different. For me, it's been six *years* and two days."

"And how do you know it hasn't been that long for him too?"

"I *don't* know that. I don't know anything. This is all one huge crapshoot."

"Listen to me, Mariah. I speak from experience, from watching you humans over the past eighty or so years. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Yes, you run the risk of him thinking you're crazy, but you have to trust your instincts and you have to trust him. Do you think he might believe you?"

"Yes, he might believe me," she said with a slow nod, "but I might win the lottery too, and you know the odds of that."

Davina slapped a fist into her hand. "Kiddo, love is worth the risk."

## **Chapter Eleven**

Mariah wished she had one of those airplane barf bags tucked into her purse, because she felt like she was going to hurl any minute. Either that or jump to her feet and run screaming from the room.

The small, intimate wedding had been beautiful. If her emotions hadn't been in such turmoil, she would have enjoyed it. Even though she barely knew them, when Tony and Rhonda had exchanged their vows, Mariah couldn't stop a few tears from falling. And Tucker...dressed in a slate gray Armani suit and shiny black shoes, he looked more gorgeous than should be legal. When he winked at Mariah during the ceremony, longing squeezed her heart. It was impossible not to picture herself as the bride and Tucker as the anxious groom, but she couldn't allow herself to spin dreams like that. She had a plan and a tight timetable.

Knowing that she and Tucker would have no privacy in which to discuss things at the wedding, she'd booked a ride on the gondola. The way she saw it, once she got started, he wouldn't be able to run away calling for the men in white coats. Except the earliest tickets she could get were for eight-thirty, and that was cutting it very close. The wish expired at nine.

Unfortunately, no one else seemed to be in a hurry to get the reception over with. The cocktail hour flowed into two hours, and then, what with the introduction of the happy couple, the first dance and their thanking everyone for attending, it was seven forty-five before the salads were served.

Mariah sat next to Tucker, fidgety and trying to hide it. He was about halfway through his meal. She glanced at her watch for probably the hundredth time and her stomach cramped.

8:09.

Tucker laid a warm hand on her leg. "Hey, is everything okay?" he asked, looking a little concerned. "You haven't eaten more than two bites."

"I had too many appetizers."

"You ate half of one. I was with you."

"What are you, the food police?" she said too harshly.

He cocked his head at her, looking puzzled. "Are you trying to pick a fight? I'm just trying to figure out if anything's wrong."

Mariah sighed. "No, I'm sorry. It's just that I...I have a surprise for you."

"Does it involve chocolate mousse?" he asked, brightening.

Too nervous to laugh, she shook her head. "No. I, ah, bought two tickets for a gondola ride."

He grinned. "Hey, I always wanted to ride in one of those things."

"But the tickets are for eight-thirty. I couldn't get tickets later than that."

His eyes softening, he said, "I'd take alone time with you over dinner any time."

Fifteen minutes later they were waiting at the pier for their boat. The group disembarking included a woman who was having difficulty stepping up onto the dock. Mariah wanted to leap onto the gondola and give the woman a good shove on the rear.

It was a quarter to nine before Tucker was handing her into the sleek black boat. Mariah caught the scent of the fresh rose in a bud vase as she settled against the plush purple upholstery and tried to relax. Tucker sat next to her, his thigh against hers.

Once they were underway, the gondolier began to sing an aria. The water was an unnatural shade of blue-green and the marble was too new to accurately depict the real Venice, but the tourists didn't seem to care. The Grand Canal was crowded as usual. People on the walkways and bridges gawked at them as they floated along.

Tucker put his arm around her. Then, chuckling, he said, "Maybe I should have taken you to the spa for a massage instead. You're incredibly tense."

"That's because I have something to tell you."

Tucker grin faltered slightly. "That sounds ominous."

Mariah wished she had a witty reply, but she barely had spit. She felt even worse when he pulled his arm back and turned to face her.

"You should probably just say it and get it over with. And give me your watch while you're at it. You've been driving me crazy looking at it every two seconds."

"I'm sorry," she said, wringing her hands. "It's just that I only have twelve more minutes."

"Twelve more minutes for what? What are you talking about, Mariah?"

She looked at him and lost her nerve. "Oh God," she said, covering her face with her hands. "You're going to think I'm nuts. But I swear, I'm not crazy and I'm not making this up."

"Mariah, honey, you're scaring me," he said. "Just say it. Whatever it is, just say it."

She glanced at her watch.

8:49.

"Okay, it's like this. When I was on vacation in Mexico last year with my friends, we all bought these bracelets. According to the woman selling them, if you made a wish when you tied them on, when the bracelet fell off, your wish would come true." She paused. "And my wish involved you."

"Me?"

She nodded. "This sounds really hokey, but I couldn't forget that night in Palm Springs, so I wished that I could see you again so we could...you know."

Tucker dragged a hand over his face and laughed. "Jesus. You had me worried there for a second. So all this anguish is because you wanted to have sex with me and your wish came true?"

"Yes, but that's not all of it. You haven't heard the crazy part yet." Mariah took a deep breath. "The crazy part is that it came true because of Davina...who is a wish fairy...who magically arranged for us to meet again."



Tucker gave her a sidelong glance. "Oookay." Now he sounded skeptical. "A wish fairy. Are you talking like a Tinker Bell fairy?" His laugh sounded forced.

"Kind of. But Davina is life-sized and dresses like a normal person, not in a tutu."

"I see."

Tucker rested an ankle on his knee and seemed to take a moment to reflect on what she'd said. After a moment, he flicked a finger toward her watch. "So, you said before we only have twelve more minutes," he said. "What's all that about?"

"I have to tell you about the wish or it gets annulled."

"Annulled? What the hell does that mean? Do I suddenly get poofed back to the Bahamas? Do I...hey, wait a second." He leaned forward, frowning. His voice got deadly serious and his face hardened with anger. "Is Tony going to be hurt by this? Does his wedding get erased? Because if his life gets screwed up because of this..."

Horried, she quickly shook her head. "No, no. Nothing like that. You would just forget everything that happened between us over the last forty-eight hours. That's all. Tony and Rhonda are fine, I swear. I mean, I guess they'd forget me too, but otherwise..."

Tucker relaxed slightly. "Well, thank God for that."

Exhaling roughly, he leaned back, his face unreadable. She'd seen that expression before when he was playing. It shielded his thoughts like a stone wall, and for all she knew, he was figuring out how to get rid of her. Just the idea of that possibility stabbed her in the heart, and to her utter horror, she burst into tears.

"Tucker, I'm sorry to dump all this on you like this," she cried, "but everything I told you is true. I have proof, but I can't show it to you. Davina says it's against the rules and I can't break any more rules. So if you want to walk away and never talk to me again, I'd understand. I'd totally understand."

Fighting back her tears as best she could, Mariah wiped her eyes. She couldn't look at him. She was too afraid she'd see that damned poker face of his again, or something

worse, like pity or disappointment. She did risk a glance at the gondolier, but he was staring politely ahead at the canal, still singing his aria as if his passenger hadn't just turned into a mad, sniveling basket case.

Tucker took several long, deep breaths, and although Mariah tried to do the same, she wasn't as successful. She was trying to think of something to say when he nudged her foot.

"You know, I can't walk away for two reasons," he said. "First, we're on a boat."

Mariah gave a half-sob/half-laugh in spite of herself. If he thought she was insane, would he be joking around like this? She didn't think so. Hope flickered inside her.

Leaning forward, Tucker took her face in his hands and turned it toward him.

"Second," he said, looking into her eyes, "I couldn't walk away from you. Not after finding you again."

"Oh my God," she sobbed, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks. "You believe me? You don't think I'm nuts?"

Tucker shook his head slowly. The poker face had disappeared and all that was left was his warm smile.

"Look," he said, "I've never been one to believe in ghosts or psychics or junk like that, but I read people pretty well, and I don't think you're insane. So if you say some kind of pixie voodoo brought us together, then I gotta believe you."

## Chapter Twelve

After helping Mariah out of the gondola, Tucker pulled out some cash to tip the gondolier. As he handed the guy some bills, he noticed something strange. His lucky card seemed different.

“What the...?” He pulled it out of his money clip to get a closer look.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Mariah moved next to him to see what had his attention.

“Look.”

It was undoubtedly the same card, still frayed from handling and still missing the upper left corner. However, it was no longer the king of clubs. In the box where the solemn monarch was usually pictured, a king of hearts smiled — *with* his queen. And the card shimmered and flashed as if from a diamond glaze.

“Oh my God,” Mariah whispered. “Davina did this. I know it. It’s just the sort of sappy thing she would do.”

Then, as they watched, the king and queen kissed.

Tucker’s jaw dropped. “I’ll be damned.”

He believed Mariah about the magic, he truly did, but this positive proof still startled him. He quickly palmed the card, not wanting to call any more attention to the fact that his life had been magically hijacked. Not that he minded. He just hadn’t quite come to grips with the existence of real hocus-pocus.

“Hey,” Mariah said, taking the card from him, “I want to see that... Aww, they’re cuddling.”

Tucker checked for himself. Like an animated movie, the king and queen were affectionately rubbing cheeks.

"You know what this means, don't you?" Mariah said excitedly. "It means it worked. It worked! I did what I was supposed to. We're clear for an HEA!"

With a squeal, she threw herself into his arms, almost knocking them both into the drink. Tucker chuckled and hugged her back. He had no idea what an HEA was, but he didn't really care much, not when he could feel her soft breasts pressed against his chest.

"Hell, I could have told you that. If it hadn't worked, I would have looked at you and wondered why the hell I was on a boat with you. Instead," he said into her ear, "I remember everything about the past two days. I remember how you taste between your legs, how wet you get when I suck on your —"

"Tucker!" Mariah stepped back, a reproachful scowl on her face. "Someone's going to hear you."

She dashed off past the people waiting for their turn in the gondola. Tucker laughed and followed her at a jog.

"On second thought," he hollered, "I think I'm starting to forget you."

"You are not!" she called over her shoulder, still walking quickly in the direction of the wedding reception.

"Yes I am. I think my memory needs refreshing. Upstairs. In my room."

"Tucker, no," she said as he finally caught up. "We have to get back to the wedding. They're going to cut the cake, and they'll probably want to thank me, and I won't be there and they'll wonder why."

"Damn," he said. "When you're right, you're right."

An hour later, the cake had been duly admired, cut and eaten. Guests were dancing and drinking and Tucker had a hard-on that wouldn't go away. It didn't help that the band was playing a slow song that had Mariah pressed up against him, swaying and rocking, her curvy softness tempting him like the chocolates in her display case. His hands ached to squeeze her ass cheeks and pull her up tight so she could feel his

stubborn erection. Damned if he wasn't counting the minutes until it was late enough to say goodbye and drag Mariah upstairs to bed. More than anything he wanted to tickle that mole of hers, the one that hid next to her clit. He wanted to lick it, circle it with his tongue, coax all the honey out of her that he could so that after she came all over his face, he'd be able to slip his cock right inside. After that he'd do his best to satisfy her so completely that the next day she'd sleep until noon.

Unfortunately, Mariah had already mentioned she wanted to hang around for the tossing of the bouquet, so sighing, he resigned himself to another half hour at least until he spied a door they'd tried to shield with potted plants festooned with twinkle lights. A quick glance told him that the banquet room had been divvied up to provide a more intimate space for this small reception, and he recalled only one sign outside in the hallway identifying the DeLuca reception.

Conclusion: there was no party going on next door.

Not yet, anyhow.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's going on? Where are we going?" Mariah frowned at Tucker as he led her away from the dance floor after the song ended.

"I have a surprise for *you* now," he replied, looking around to see if anyone was watching them. No one was.

He pulled the door open, swiftly drew Mariah with him into the darkened room and closed it behind them.

"Tucker," Mariah protested, "I can't see a—"

He cut off her words with a kiss. Mariah was obviously startled but didn't hesitate to kiss him back. Their tongues slid against each other as he herded her toward the partition. A more lively song played in the room next door, for which Tucker was glad. The louder the music, the better the sound buffer.

Mariah clutched him tightly as he ran a hand along her thigh, lifting her leg so it rested against his hip and allowed him to grind himself against her. She moaned as the ridge of his cock rubbed her.

“Have you ever done it in public before like this?”

“No, never,” she said, panting.

“Me either, but I want you too damn much to wait.”

Their mouths met again. Tucker reached under her dress and snuck a hand into her panties. Her pussy was already dripping. With a low moan, he pushed a finger inside the tight heat and then back out again. Mariah rocked her hips toward him as he thrust his tongue into her mouth with a corresponding tempo.

By now his eyes had adjusted to the darkness. The room held only furniture—round tables and stacks of chairs lined up along the perimeter. As much as he wanted to take Mariah right up against the wall, he was afraid the movable partition would give them away. Making a quick decision, he grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her with a grunt on top of the nearest stack of chairs. She stifled a gasp and flailed, grabbing the base of the topmost chair as they tilted slightly with her weight.

“I gotcha,” he said, steadying her. Now she was at the perfect height.

“You’re crazy,” she said under her breath, still gripping the seat of the chair.

“Crazy about you,” he replied in a low voice. He reached under her dress and tugged her panties off.

She gave a little laugh. “How crazy?”

Tucker paused, her undies dangling from his hand. He knew her question was an earnest one cloaked in an offhand tone, and he was tempted to give her a flip answer, but she deserved better than that. She’d shown her emotional hand to him when she admitted to TiVoing the WPT and again in the gondola when she’d divulged everything about the wish and the magic. He couldn’t in good conscience keep his own feelings so close to his chest, not if he wanted this budding relationship to work.

"I'm so crazy about you," he said slowly, annoyed at how jittery he felt, "that I'm moving here. I'm going to relocate to Vegas."

She fell silent, peering at him. Her eyes were bright even in the darkness of the empty room. Even though he could hear the party going on strong next door, he felt as though he and Mariah were frozen in time. He was pretty sure she'd be more than okay with his announcement, but his nerves jangled nonetheless.

"Are you moving here because of me?" she asked finally.

The tremble and uncertainty in her voice made his chest feel tight. Suddenly he worried she might cry again, like she had on the gondola, and he quailed at the memory. God, that had been torture. Every sob had twisted his heart. At that moment on the boat, he'd have done anything to take away her distress. He'd wanted to protect her at all costs, and now, here in the deserted banquet room with her weighted question hanging in the air, he realized with a growing sense of alarm that he was always going to feel that way.

He loved her.

He stepped backward, stunned by this revelation. His scalp prickled and he broke into a cold sweat. He told himself that maybe all this sentimentality was because he'd just taken part in the wedding of his lifelong friend. Plus, this was Vegas. Something about this town infected people with a nuptial virus, hence the wedding chapels on every block. Unfortunately, none of that canceled out the fact that his feelings existed.

He loved her. Love was serious. It meant commitment, exclusivity...things he wasn't necessarily opposed to. He'd witnessed firsthand the happiness a man and a woman could have together. His parents were deeply in love with each other, to the exclusion of most everything else, including their son. Although most of his life he'd fought against resenting them for it, he did have to admit that his mom and dad had something special. What Tucker really craved was what the DeLucas had—a loving, inclusive marriage, one that embraced kids.

He just hadn't planned on settling down yet. Well, to be honest, he hadn't really planned at all. Like most guys, he'd never mapped out a specific timetable and relegated all that marriage stuff to "the future". But maybe the future was now. Maybe his future was Mariah.

Gulping hard, he raised his gaze to hers and tried to talk, but the three words stuck in his throat. He cleared it, determined not to let nervousness get the best of him. Timidity didn't serve him at the tables and it wouldn't here either.

Time to go all in.

Leaning forward, he cleared his throat. "Yeah, I'm moving here because of you," he said clearly. "Because it's really stupid to live on the opposite side of the country from the woman you love."

He heard a little squeak as she covered her mouth with her hand. "You didn't just say what I think you said."

"Yes, I did," he said. "I love you." This time he sounded sure of himself.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized he wanted to share everything with her—successes and losses, hopes and worries and even the mundane, everyday goings-on of their lives. He wanted to know what kind of day she had, if she'd invented a new truffle. Hell, if she got a paper cut, he wanted to hear about it. He needed to take care of her, nurture her business, raise a family...all that sappy stuff that Tony had just pledged himself to.

Then he heard the unmistakable sound of her crying again.

"Oh come on, Mariah, please don't cry. I hate it when you cry."

He moved forward again, parting her knees so he could get as close as possible, and she threw her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, clinging to him with unexpected strength.

"I can't help it," she said into his neck. "I'm so happy. I'm filled up with happy and it's coming out through my eyes."



He chuckled, feeling perilously close to filling up too. Good thing it was pitch dark. And good thing he knew how to distract himself. With his declaration out of the way, he would take up where they'd left off. The heat of her pussy was burning him through his pants and his cock was waking up again.

Their mouths found each other, tongues too. He kissed her deeply, thoroughly, as if he wanted to absorb her. She was completely off the chairs now, clinging him as he struggled to hold her up and undo his belt at the same time.

"God, I love you, Tucker," she gasped as he freed his aching cock. "I always have."

Fuck. It was just like Tony had said. Her words hit him like a ton of bricks. All of a sudden, he felt like the Hulk, like his muscles had doubled in size. With a shift of her hips, she angled her body so he could slide inside her as he supported her with hands hooked under her thighs. He groaned as she enveloped him, her spicy scent gusting up from between them. Widening his stance to stabilize himself, he lifted her and lowered her back down. Her pussy gripped his cock with a tight friction that made him grit his teeth. She braced herself with her forearms on his shoulders, her legs against his hips, aiding their movements, but there was no way he was going to get the kind of speed he needed. He wanted, needed to pound her hard and fast.

Somehow he managed to get them to the floor, still connected, with Mariah on her back. He claimed her mouth in a deep, penetrating kiss, muffling her moans as he thrust into her in earnest now. Her hips rose again and again to meet his. She seemed as desperate for it as he was. Nothing mattered but reaching that pinnacle together. He was fucking her so hard, they were inching their way across the carpet, but she took everything he doled out.

To keep her head from colliding with the chair legs, she grabbed them with her hands, but she gasped, "Don't stop."

He didn't bother answering. With perspiration gathering on his forehead, he redoubled his efforts. His arms trembled with the strain as he continued to slam into her. His breath left his lungs in great bursts. His balls slapped against her with each

swift stroke. The pressure built inside him to an unbelievable level, and just when he thought he was going to lose it, she arched up with a cry. Her lush cunt clutched his cock, sending him over the edge, setting off a devastating explosion. His entire body shuddered as the pleasure cascaded through him more intensely than ever before.

He knew at that moment that he was going to marry her. Instinct told him it didn't get better than this. Sure, they were sprawled on industrial carpet, in danger of being discovered and possibly arrested for indecent exposure, but none of that mattered.

He'd found his Mrs. Freeze.

## **Epilogue**

*One month later*

"It's just beautiful," Mariah said earnestly. Her heart swelled with love as she gazed at the slightly lopsided cake that Tucker had made. "I've never seen anything more beautiful in my whole life."

Tucker laughed. "Call the asylum," he said to Tony. "They need to make up a room for her again. Ow!" He rubbed his arm where Mariah had just punched him. Petals from her wedding bouquet fluttered to the floor.

"I think you did a great job, Tucker," Mariah's friend Paige said. "What kind is it?"

"Chocolate with chocolate mousse filling," he said. "Chocolate mousse is our favorite."

Livvy grinned. "Of course it's chocolate. It had to be chocolate. I'm just kind of wondering what it's supposed to be. It looks sort of like a Viking ship."

Mariah pressed her lips together to stifle a laugh as Tucker pinched the bridge of his nose.

"It is not, for your information, a Viking ship," he said with mock indignation. "It is a gondola."

"Oh! Of course. I see it now," Livvy exclaimed with a giggle.

"Well, it doesn't really matter what it is," Tony said, rubbing his hands together, "because in just a second they're gonna cut that baby and Tucker's gonna be wearing it all over his face!"

Everyone gathered closer as the bride and groom sliced the cake, camera flashes going off all around them. Mariah felt like pinching herself. So much happiness welled up inside her, she had enough to share with half of Nevada. True love existed. You just had to want it and believe in it. She felt like telling everyone she knew to go to Mexico

and buy a wishing bracelet, but she couldn't do that. She was prohibited from talking about the Universal Wish Federation to anyone except Tucker. It just about killed her not to share her whole experience with Livvy and Paige, but she wasn't about to mess with the Rules. No way, no how.

"Okay, Mariah!" Tony cried. "Do me proud now. Make him wear it!"

Laughing as she took a chunk of cake in hand, she did her best to fake Tucker out and smear it all over, but she only managed to decorate his cheek a little.

Tucker, on the other hand, had already gotten another marriage mandate from Bill, which stated that under no circumstances was he to try to retaliate. So, as he carefully fed her a bite of cake and then kissed her with great restraint, he thought wickedly about the coming wedding night and how he'd already arranged for an extra bowl of mousse to be waiting in their suite. He had plans to slather it between Mariah's legs and then lap it up until she was writhing with pleasure and coming hard.

The waitstaff whisked the cake away so they could serve the rest of the guests dessert, and as the band struck up the music again, Tucker marveled at his good fortune. Who could have predicted that he'd end up like this, head over heels in love with a chocolatier who had convinced him to believe in fairies?

Only one person, he thought with a wry smile. A certain party crasher lurking in the back of the banquet room.

Although Davina obviously wanted to remain incognito, Tucker couldn't let her go without thanking her. He tugged on the cuffs of his shirt as he ambled over.

"Hi," he said, "I'm Tucker."

Looking a little flustered as they shook hands, she said, "Iona Fleming, friend of Mariah's."

She tried to extricate her hand from his, but he wouldn't let go. Instead, he squeezed it and leaned closer. "Look, Mariah pointed you out to me earlier, so I know you're more than a friend, *Davina*," he said. "I also know that I owe you big time."

"Oh stop," Davina said, her cheeks turning pink. "This really isn't necessary."

"Yes it is," Tucker insisted. He gestured toward the party going on behind him. "All this is because of you, and I wanted to tell you how grateful I am. Mariah's..." He paused. "Mariah's the best thing that ever happened to me, and if it wasn't for you..."

He shook his head. His throat felt thick all of a sudden. Putting a fist to his mouth, he coughed a couple of times and then tried again.

"I—I just owe you, that's all," he said at last.

Davina pressed her lips together and nodded. "Shoot, I was just doing my job," she said as Mariah hurried over.

"Davina, I saw you earlier but I couldn't—" Mariah gasped and touched a pin on Davina's lapel. "Is that...? You got Cupid of the Month? I don't believe it!"

As Mariah hugged the fairy tightly, Tucker looked on and smiled. God, he loved her. He loved her more than he would have thought possible. He loved her chocolate smell. He loved how she practically hissed when other women came on to him. And he loved how she was turning the house they'd bought into a real home, a place with pictures on the walls and personal junk on the shelves and no moving boxes anywhere.

"Oh no!" someone cried. "My bracelet's gone!"

It was Paige. She was rubbing her wrist, a look of dismay on her heart-shaped face. There was a slight commotion as several people near her started scanning the floor.

Chuckling, Tucker grinned at Mariah and said, "Is she talking about *the* bracelet?"

Mariah nodded, laughing. "And wait until you hear what she wished for!"

Before Mariah could give any details, Davina's pager went off.

"There you go," the fairy said, looking at the readout. "Paige Mahoney, Case Number 072791. Party time's over for me," Davina said, pulling out a pamphlet as she headed for Paige.

"Hey, make sure you give her the right one!" Mariah called out.

Davina's step faltered.

“That is so not funny,” she muttered.

## About the Author

Kate Willoughby got hooked on romance in the late seventies when she read *Sweet Savage Love* by Rosemary Rogers. Inspired, she and her best friend wrote a contemporary love story involving a multi-millionaire playboy and the restaurant hostess determined to cure his drinking problem. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it), that manuscript has been lost forever.

Fast forward to college, where she took a creative writing course. Kate still wanted to write love stories, but everyone else in class was composing Important Literature and Thought-Provoking Poetry. A few devastating critiques later, she gave up, discouraged and embarrassed. Eventually, her muse got over the trauma and pestered her to try her hand at writing again.

Kate resides in Los Angeles with her husband of fifteen years and their two sons. When the testosterone in the house builds up to unbearable levels, she escapes by reading, cooking, and scrapbooking with friends.

Kate welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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